UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.

ODYSSEY FOR SURVIVAL: NINA'S STORY

As told to and written by
Toby Forim Blake

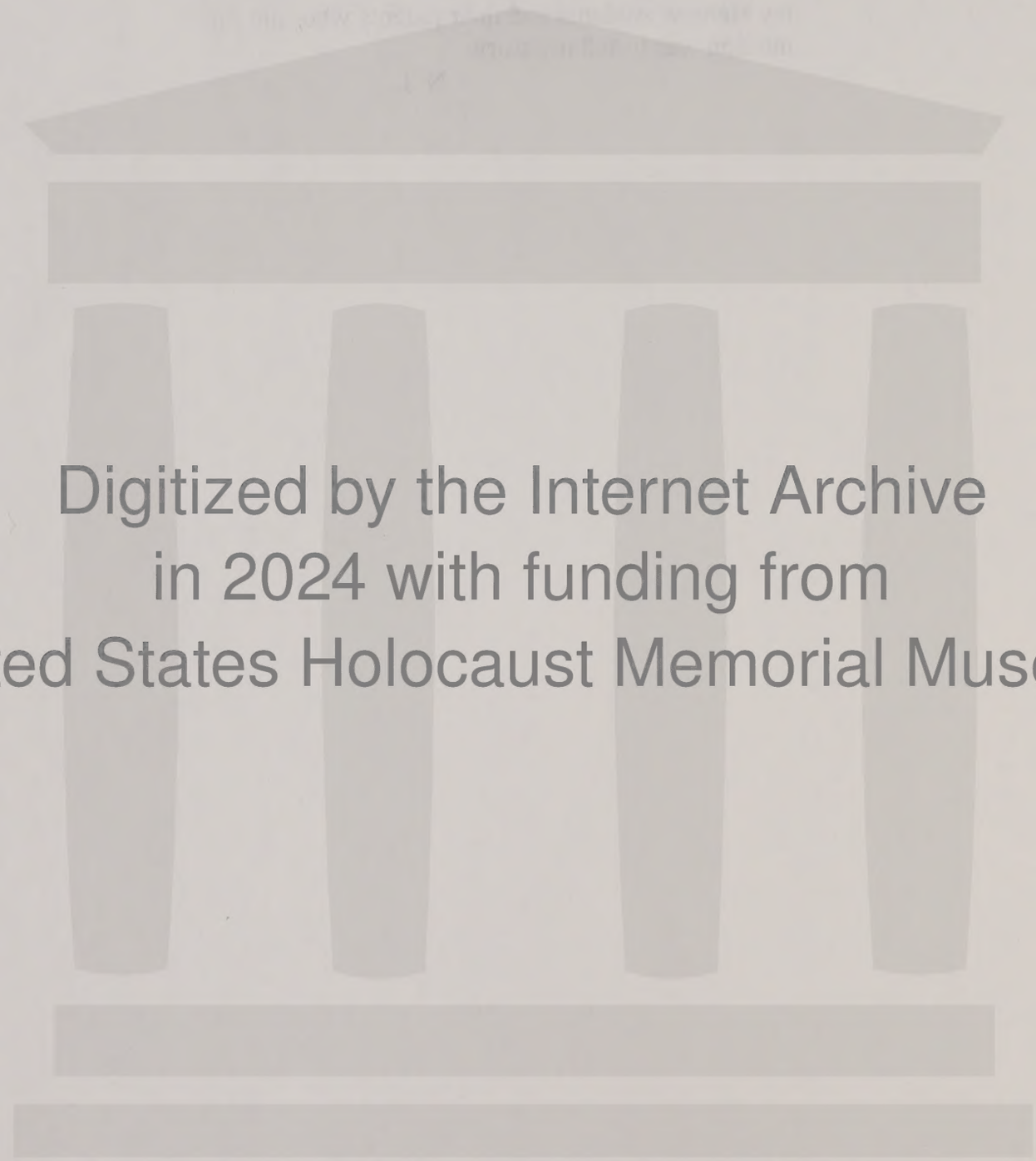
1999

Dedicated to the memory of those who perished
and to the spirit of those who survived

T.F.B.

To my family lost during the Holocaust and to the my Hebrew students and their parents who said my mission was to tell my story.

N. L.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

https://archive.org/details/bib292193

Prologue

I grew up in the area known today as Belarus. It frequently changed hands between the Soviet Union and Poland. Prior to 1920, it was part of the Soviet Union. In the period between World War I and World War II, 1920 to 1939, it came under Polish domination. After 1939, it reverted once again to the Soviet Union.

Prior to the beginning of World War II, Poland was a multiethnic society. Poles, Ukrainians, Jews and Germans made up the majority of the population. Poland had the largest Jewish population in Europe until 1939. It is estimated that 3 million Jews lived in Poland at the outbreak of the war. That figure represented over 10% of the Polish population and over 30% of Warsaw's population. When Germany invaded Poland on September 30, 1939, World War II was declared when France and Great Britain entered the conflict. On November 23, 1939 Reich law required Jews in Poland to wear a yellow star.

As Belarus at this time was under Soviet control, and due to my escape east deep into the Soviet Union, I never wore a yellow star nor faced the Nazis. I was the only member of my family to do so.

July 21, 1940 marked the start of the liquidation of the ghettos in Poland, beginning with Nieswiez.

It is estimated that some 200,000 Polish Jews survived the Holocaust period. Everyone who survived the Holocaust is a miracle. Each person has his or her individual stories. Those in the concentration camps differ from those who were forced to flee eastward, or from those who hid in the forests, were hidden as children or joined the

partisans. All suffered. One did what one had to do in order to live from day to day. The inner fortitude one drew on for survival is not easily explicable. At 78 years of age, I still find myself unable to explain where that inner strength came from. Our spirit continued in spite of horrific losses. We were proud Jews and wanted to continue to be proud Jews. We were cut off from our European roots. So we planted our roots in new soil and resolved to rebuild. This is my story, the story of one person's odyssey for survival.

Chapter 1

My story begins at a time when my family lived in great comfort and security in Nieswiez, Poland (pronounced Neshvesh). We lived a privileged life due to the very successful business my parents owned and operated. A close and loving family who shared happy, carefree times together surrounded us.

Nieswiez was a beautiful old town located 60 miles southwest of Minsk. It was known as a center of culture and prestige due to the princely Radziwill family who resided there. Their stately palace with its bridge and moat was the focal point of our town. Other members of the Polish nobility were drawn to the town building grand homes and estates. Many opportunities for employment, either directly or indirectly, resulted. The Radziwills hosted grand balls and hunting outings. They brought great artists to the palace. The town's reputation grew not only from its cultural activities but also from the well-respected high school, *Vladislova Serakomle Gymnasium,* which the Radziwills supported.

Another feature of the well-planned town was the town hall and its square located in the center of the city. On three sides of this structure stood rows of stalls that housed various shops. The open-air farmer's market set up on the grounds in front of these shops.

Approximately fifty percent of the population in Nieswiez was Jewish. Most Jews were tradesmen. The Jewish community had a central *kehillah*, organization, which helped it to function. There were eight synagogues in our town, all located around a central square. Some tradesmen like the *schneiders*, tailors, built their own synagogue and school. The community was large enough to support a wide variety of Jewish organizations that operated successfully. Two of these included Keren Kayemet

L'Yisrael (Jewish National Fund) and Hashomer Hatzair, a social, Zionist youth organization that maintained a training farm on the outskirts of town.

Jewish parents in Nieswiez had educational choices to make as the community supported synagogue based cheder, a yeshiva, a Yiddish school as well as the equivalent of public schools. For those who could afford it and desired a school with a Zionist orientation, there was a Tarbut school. The *Vladislova Serakomle Gymnasium* was open to all students who could meet its academic standard.

The Kaczanowski household consisted of seven members, my parents, Shlomo and Itka, my brothers Avrum, nicknamed Bomkeh, Shalom and Yaacov, our Bubie or Grandmother, Sura Riva Kerbel, and myself, Nechama or Nina. Avrum was two years younger than myself and Yaacov some eight years younger. Shalom was the middle brother. We had an older sister who died in an epidemic at about two years of age. I was about six months old at the time and very ill as well. My Mother was convinced that I was cured and saved by the *bainkes*, cups, which the doctor applied, all over my back.

My parents ran a very successful business in Nieswiez. Their store inventoried with fabric, china, silver, linens and other house wares was open to the public. However, the vast majority of their business came from filling special orders from the palace. My Mother was the driving force behind the business. She was the one who went to Warsaw every month or two to do the buying for the business. Father remained behind to run the store. Mother built a good working relationship with her suppliers. She negotiated for good prices and often got the terms she sought. She had the reputation for having the business sense of a man, a true compliment for a woman at this time.

The success of this business was evident by the way we lived. We resided in a large six-bedroom house located on the road to the palace. We rented the house because Mama always said, "It is better to be a rich tenant than a poor owner." The property had its own well, an orchard and beautiful flower gardens. The rooms in our home were well decorated. We had lovely antiques. Many of these pieces had been purchased from the palace. The living room with its gilt bamboo furniture and plush cushions was my favorite. There was a set of antique china put aside for use only at Passover that I particularly loved. There was help in the house and for the grounds. Father enjoyed seeing us in new outfits for each holiday and for the start of the new school year. He prided himself on being able to provide us with the best. One of his great joys was to bring fine chocolate candy for us to eat.

My parents were observant and knowledgeable. Our lives revolved around the weekly celebration of Shabbat and the cycle of holidays that fill each year. Our home was infused with the warmth of tradition. We were taught a love and respect for life and for Judaism. Our family warmly hosted guests who needed a Jewish home for Shabbat or holidays. Often these were strangers to our community who Father invited to share these times.

My Father *davened*, prayed, daily donning tefillin, phylacteries, each weekday morning. When he was done reciting *Shacharit*, the morning service, Bubie would sometimes gently pressure my father to *daven* not only Shacharit but also *Mincha-Ma'ariv* in the evening. He patiently listened to her and replied, "If God would only listen to my prayers in the morning, I would be content." She would leave him alone for

a while and then pressure him again. His response was always the same. It was a game between them reflecting the warm and special relationship they shared.

My parents employed a maid to help in the kitchen and in the house. Bubie worried constantly that the maid would compromise the *kashrut* of our home by mixing the separate sets of milk and the meat dishes, pots, silverware and so forth. She regularly registered her concerns with whoever would listen to her. Mama, always a woman of action rather than talk, finally told Bubie to stop wasting her energy worrying and supervise the maid while she was in the kitchen!

Bubie was a very pious woman who had been married to a *melamed*, a scholar. My Grandfather Menachem, for whom I was named, died a young man leaving her to raise three small children, my Mother, Itka, another daughter, Shifra, and a son, Isaac who was three years of age at the time of his father's death. Isaac's brilliance was evident at this early age by his learning to recite *Kaddish*, the prayer that memorializes the dead. My aunt and uncle, as young adults, had gone to Russia prior to the Russian Revolution to study and to work. As a result of some policy, they could not return to Poland. Consequently, Bubie lived with my parents.

The Kerbels were a family divided by geography and politics. Bubie made it obvious that she loved being with us, but she always longed to visit Shifra and Isaac, to see, to touch and to hug her children and her grandchildren. They corresponded regularly and exchanged photographs, but this did not fulfill her desire to be with them. My Mother did her best to help Bubie in moments when this desire seemed to overwhelm her.

I would describe my Mother as a strong, decisive and wise woman. She had an incredible memory perhaps it was photographic. She knew the entire Bible by heart. She

read all the great writers and could recite Pushkin and other authors. It was hard to believe that she was basically self-taught.

She gave my brothers and I a good *kindershtub,* upbringing. She taught us to differentiate between what was important and what was not. She stressed the need to think for ourselves. Mother had an interesting philosophy. She always said, "Consider your decision before you make it, then stand by your decision. Always look forward not backward." I was to grow to appreciate the wisdom of her words. It would help me to survive what I was to face during the war.

My Father's parents lived in Lanyeh located about three or four miles from our home on the other side of a large woods or forest. My Grandfather Yaacov and his wife Raizel had six children. There were two sons, my father, Shlomo and my Uncle Lazer, and four daughters, my Aunts Esther, Itka, Rivel and Gruna. Each had married and had a family. Uncle Lazar and Aunt Rifkah's children were Manya, Avraham, and Layla. Aunt Itka had two daughters, Riva Leah and Chaika. Aunt Esther married Shlomo Volochvinski. Their daughters were Tzipka and Brindyl and their son was Shalom. Aunt Gruna had three daughters, Tzipora, Dina and Feigel. It was quite a family, fifteen cousins with whom to share good time and to get into mischief with!

My grandparents ran a business and an inn on their farm, which was located on the road between Nieswiez and Kleck. Travelers stopped to buy provisions like fruit, vegetables, milk and cheese for their journey. Some rented rooms to stay a night or more.

My grandparents' farm produced a limited number of crops. What they did not grow, they bought from the local peasants by the wagonload. A portion would be resold

and a portion would be preserved for the winter. The peasants in turn purchased products that they themselves could not produce. The sales for salt, sugar, tea, herring and kerosene were strong.

Grandfather would walk to Nieswiez on Shabbat. Grandfather called our *shul* the *"grosse kalte shul"*, the big, cold synagogue. It was a play on the synagogue's name, Kalte Shul. This large beautiful synagogue was built with a portion of the building being round. The *bima,* pulpit, was located in the middle of the floor in this area. The women's gallery was upstairs overlooking the main floor. It truly was magnificent but truly cold in winter as it was a very difficult building to heat. I remember that both my Grandfather and my Uncle Lazer had beautiful voices. Sometimes they were honored to act as the *hazan*, cantor, at services.

If for some reason Grandfather did not come to *shul*, the family would meet in Lanyeh at his home. Only inclement weather prevented us from sharing at least some part of the day together. We children looked forward to each Shabbat as all the cousins were together. Looking back it was a special time. It was how our family remained close and continued to build special bonds between one another.

Although we visited often, I looked forward to spending extended time there in the summer during school vacation. All my cousins would be there as well. We all had small chores to do. Often we helped my Grandmother pick fresh vegetables. She would make cheese from the milk of their cows. It tasted so wonderful. Was it because she had made it? Or does memory make me think it was special? I also remember my brothers climbing the tall cherry trees to pick the fruit from the very top. They insisted it tasted

better from the height of the tree. Bomkeh once fell from the top of a fruit tree. How lucky he was to have only suffered only cuts and bruises.

My parents supported the Zionist movement. They sent us to the Tarbut School and encouraged us to be active in Hashomer Hatzair youth movement. Many of the orthodox boys and girls whom we met in the group believed that orthodoxy was a lifestyle of the Diaspora, so they rebelled against it by advocating the idea of settling in Palestine. Hashomer Hatzair meetings revolved around talking about the land, speaking Hebrew, and sometimes going on outings. Its goal was to organize young people to be knowledgeable enough and prepared enough to build a place for themselves in Palestine. Older children were sent for the summer to camps where they were taught agricultural skills. They experienced life, as they would live it in a collective setting, in a kibbutz.

The goals of Hashomer Hatzair blended well with those of the Tarbut school movement. This Zionist oriented educational movement maintained many institutions in Poland as well as other places in Europe. The curriculum was imbued with Jewish nationalistic spirit promoting pioneer settlement in Palestine. Tarbut published its own textbooks and magazines. Due to the cost of tuition, the student body in these private schools was predominately from middle and upper class Jewish families.

I enjoyed learning at Tarbut. We were required to speak Hebrew and to read Hebrew texts as well. All of the subjects even Polish history were taught in Hebrew. I completed my education at Tarbut at about age eleven. I was so in love with the Hebrew language I wanted to continue in a Hebrew high school in Vilna. My parents would not agree to let me go away to school at such a young age especially as there was an excellent high school in the city.

I had never been a difficult child, but that year I became a rebel. I refused to attend school. I insisted that all I wanted was to continue to learn Hebrew. I argued if I could not go to Vilna, I would create my own program of study. I would stay at home and read books in Hebrew. I was so insistent and persistent, my parents agreed to allow me to pursue my plan. There was one condition. If I did not follow through with my plan, I would have to attend the school of their choice. Being an avid reader, I think I read about one hundred and fifty Hebrew books that year. I learned a great deal from my reading but above all, I learned the Hebrew language.

Finally I had to bend to my parents' wishes. They had given me time to be rebellious and pursue my dream in my own way. Now I had to do as they required. I secretly continued to wish I was in Vilna, but I knew it was not to be. My parents enrolled me in the *Gymnasium.* The school was run by and staffed by Catholic priests. Open to anyone who met the academic qualifications, the *Gymnasium*'s excellent curriculum prepared students for advanced studies at the university level. The school benefited in various ways from its sponsorship by the Radziwills. When the Radziwills invited various artists, writers, dancers and musicians to visit the palace to speak or to entertain themselves and their guests, they arranged for the visit to be extended to the school as well. I'm not sure we realized how fortunate we were or appreciated the experiences afforded us.

I did not like to admit it, but I enjoyed going to school there. The classes were interesting and challenging. I was a good math student and would often help fellow students when asked. I must have been doing very well in all subjects at the *Gymnasium*. I remember my mother going to meet with the priest who headed the school. He told her

"When Nusha, my Polish nickname, finishes school, I will give her the best recommendation for medicine or any field of study she wants." My parents were so proud of me.

I never experienced any problems being a Jewish child in a non-Jewish environment. The non-Jewish students accepted me and included me in school activities. The friendships extended beyond the classroom as well. I had many friends from the *Gymnasium*. We socialized outside of school. Groups of friends went ice skating or skiing on the Radziwill palace grounds or mountain climbing. We visited one another's homes. We got along well, truly enjoying each other's company.

By the time I finished my studies at age sixteen, Hitler had come to power in Germany. Everything changed overnight. I had trouble understanding why my world should be affected so dramatically by the political situation in Germany. My non-Jewish friends no longer wished to be around me. I was hurt by their change in attitude and by the abrupt end of friendships. I was still the same person. I had not changed. The Priest was no longer willing to give me the recommendation for medicine. I was not disappointed with the lack of that recommendation. I still had my dream to go to Vilna to study Hebrew.

Our family was a tight knit group who supported one another in any way needed. In 1924 the Polish government issued decrees restricting the economic activity of the Jewish population within its borders. This decree did not affect my parents. Over time it did impact many people in our community including Aunt Gruna's husband. Each year he found it increasingly difficult to support his family. As he saw his chances for employment dwindle, he decided that his future lay in the *goldeneh medina*, the golden

land of the United States. The family was very saddened by this turn of events. They were upset that he felt he could not succeed in Poland. They were upset that their close-knit family was to be broken apart. As did many immigrants, he left alone to establish himself before sending for his wife and children. Aunt Gruna, Tzipora, Dina and Feigel, were cared for by the family. The family provided them with a place to live, food to eat, clothing to wear and saw to their other needs.

Eventually, the time came for them to leave. A wagon was piled high with their belongings, the things Aunt Gruna and the family felt necessary to start a new life in a new place. I remember the tear streaked faces as everyone said their good-byes. I remember all of us running after the wagon, calling out last minute thoughts. No one knew if the family would ever be together again. As it turned out, their leaving was to be a blessing in disguise. It was the late 1920's.

My parents business continued to prosper. We enjoyed a very comfortable life style until Aunt Rivel and her husband had difficulty earning a living for themselves and their three children during the Great Depression.. Again the family rallied to help support one of its own. Aunt Rivel and her husband came to my parents with a plan to build a windmill that would operate a mill. My parents gave them some money and borrowed more to help them with their venture. The windmill was built outside of the city. The venture failed causing the undoing of two families. Aunt Rivel and her family lost everything. When my parents went to repay the loan, which had been something like five zloyts to the dollar, it cost twelve zloyts to the dollar. My parents were forced to sell their business in order to pay back the outstanding debt. They too lost everything. It was 1932.

My Father became very depressed. He worried about how to support our family. He worried about our future. He was upset that he could no longer provide his children with the best of everything. He had always been so pleased he could give us whatever we wanted. My Mother worried about him all of the time. She worried that in his state of mind he might try to commit suicide. Mother attempted never to allow him out of the house alone. She always made sure that he was accompanied by one of my brothers or was followed by one of them. Somehow he never realized what was happening. It was her way of trying to protect him.

After the business was sold, our life in Nieswiez changed greatly. It was not only the economic impact of the business loss, but also the social impact of losing our standing in the community. Some people distanced themselves. Other good meaning people questioned what had happened to the business. I think it frightened some of them, causing them concern that they could find themselves in a similar position. They wanted to know how a family who had been so prosperous seemingly one minute were poor the next. Well intentioned but unsolicited suggestions were offered. Some people questioned what we were going to do in order to survive.

My parents worried about that very thing. They discussed what they should do and how it would affect their children. My Mother strongly felt that part of the solution was to move the family away from Nieswiez to a community where we were not known. She felt a change of venue would be beneficial for my Father's health. My parents decided we should move to Baranovich, a larger better known community. Mother was a very optimistic person. She felt that we could start over there. The town leadership of Nieswiez came to speak with my parents once it became common knowledge that we

were leaving. They tried to encourage them to remain. Mother was steadfast in her decision. We made the move to Baranovich. It was late 1932 or 1933.

Chapter 2

The move to Baranovich was physically difficult, as no direct means of getting there existed. Taking whatever belongings we could, we first traveled by carriage from Nieswiez to Horodzie. In Horodzie we boarded a train to Baranovich.

My first impressions of Baranovich were not positive. I thought Baranovich was a backwater compared to Nieswiez. There was no formal town center. The buildings were not as nice as those were in Nieswiez. The marketplace was in the middle of the town. There was an old part of the city built around the train center and a newer section. The synagogues were spread through out the city. It struck me as a large village built using a grid going north- south and east - west. It seemed most unattractive.

Later I learned more about the city. I discovered that Jews were an important part of the population and had played a role in the development of the town. Originally Baranovich had been built as a railroad head. Initially, Jews began to settle there in small numbers unbidden without official permission in the late 1890's. When permission was granted in 1903, the Jewish population began to swell and with it the town grew and prospered. In 1921 the Jewish population comprised about fifty seven percent of the town. Baranovich was the residence of the Koidanovo and Slonem dynasties of Hassidic rabbis. There were two large yeshivot, as well as both Yiddish and Hebrew schools, including a Tarbut school. The town supported the publication of six Yiddish daily newspapers. The HeHalutz movement maintained a kibbutz training center named "Shahariyyah" near the city. Baranovich also had a central kehillah to help keep the community organized.

Settling in our first house in Baranovich made the change in our economic standing a clear reality. We went from our beautiful large home to a small rented house. There were no gardens, no green spaces to walk and enjoy. It was all we could afford. Momma said, "A house is only a house. The people who live in it make a house a home." This home was on Grafshestrasse across from a big church. As anti-Semitism was prevalent in Poland the location made my parents quiet nervous. I remember that on Christmas Day we remained in our home but we hid. I do not remember where, but I do remember my parents worry about possible repercussions at this time of year due to our being Jewish. Thank God their precautions were for naught.

As soon as it was economically feasible, we moved to another house further down on the same street. My parents rented a small store and the family lived above it. We lived there until the war started.

Things were very difficult for us after our move. Initially, we did not take part in the cultural activities of the Jewish community. We only purchased necessities. The changes in our lives were dramatic. The least affected was Yaacov as he was too young to work so he remained a student enrolled in school. Shalom worked with my Father in a flax business. Father brokered seed as well as the harvested product purchased directly from peasant farmers. The flax was used to make oil or was woven into fabric. Bomkeh worked as a bookkeeper. My mother ran the little store we lived above. She sold sodas, ice cream, candy, and the like. I gave private lessons for three or four years. We all helped in any way that we could to make ends meet. It was a struggle. Life was so different. If only we knew how different it was yet to become.

Eventually as things improved we were once again able to involve ourselves in social activities. My brothers and I made friends in our new hometown through Hashomer Hatzair. All of these friends perished during the Holocaust. My parents became involved in the community. Life was becoming more normalized again. This comfort was to be short lived.

When they could afford to do so my parents once again had open home as it had been in Nieswiez. Father enjoyed invited yeshivah students and Jewish soldiers who were stationed in Baranovich to our home to celebrate the holidays or Shabbat. Anyone who needed food or temporary lodging would find hospitality in our home.

My Mother, as did other women at that time, put up food for the winter. The attic acted like a cold cellar for the foods she would store. Fruits to were allowed to dry. Some vegetables were pickled. Onions, potatoes and other root vegetables were put aside. Some types of vegetables were placed in trays filled with fine sand to keep them until they were needed. There were large sacks filled with flour, sugar and other staples. In the summer, she would spend a great deal of time cooking fruit to make preserves that were placed in large pottery crocks.

As young women the world over, I had a boyfriend, Yitzchak. He was very serious about me. His dream was to go to Palestine to live. When he asked me to marry him, I told him I had to think about it. When I discussed his proposal with my Mother, she said, "You are still young. You don't have to get married. A girl grows until she is twenty five years of age." She was very much ahead of her time. I thought about her words. I turned him down.

Yitzchak followed his dream. He went on an illegal *aliyah* to Palestine. We learned from his family that Arabs who were attempting to stop Jewish immigrants from entering the country killed him in the waters outside of Haifa. I was deeply saddened by his death.

I never let go of my dream to study in Vilna. I never thought it would come true but it did. My parents told me that if I still wished to study at the Seminary in Vilna they would allow me to do so. I was very excited. Of course I said yes.

Mother accompanied me to Vilna the first time in 1937. It was a four-hour trip by train. Mother knew someone in the city who rented her a room for me to live in. I think she felt more secure knowing I was living under the roof of an acquaintance. When the Seminary was closed for Jewish holidays, I was able to return home to celebrate these special occasions with my family.

It took a little while for me to make a new circle of friends in Vilna. They generally were those people I studied with at the Vilna Pedagogical Seminary. Vilna was called Little Jerusalem as it was known as a seat for Jewish learning for many years. It was a beautiful city with a wide variety of Jewish social and cultural activities available for anyone who wished to take part. Although I went there to study Hebrew, Vilna was also a center for Yiddish culture. Both daily and evening Yiddish newspapers were produced as well as other Yiddish publications. The YIVO research institute for Yiddish culture and language had been established there in 1924. We were not only able to enjoy the activities of the Jewish community, but we also took advantage of the theater and sightseeing in the area.

I expected to study at the Seminary for a long time. But God smiled on me.

Between my training at the Tarbut school and what I had taught myself in Hebrew language, literature and Bible, I was given the equivalent of advanced placement in a Masters Degree program. My course of studies included Pedagogy, Methodology, Talmud, as well as advanced language and literature courses. The full course load generally took four to five years to complete. I was able to complete the program in two years earning a Masters Degree in Hebrew and Pedagogue.

Chapter 3

I remember it so clearly, September 1939. I had just returned from Vilna having completed my degree. I was very pleased and excited. I was finally going to do exactly what I had always wanted. I had been hired as a first grade teacher at the Tarbut School in Baranovich.

I was sleeping. I was awakened by the blare of the radio from another room. I thought I heard that fighting had broken out, that war had been declared. I thought for certain that I was dreaming.

I ran to my Father asking, "What was the report on the radio just now?"

He looked me in the eyes with tears in his own. "The report announced war has come to Poland. Germany has invaded."

At first I did not want to believe it was true. I can still feel the sensation in the pit of my stomach. It was a strange kind of ache mixed with flutters. Fear and uncertainty were my immediate reactions. I had questions that I was afraid to voice aloud. What would happen to us now? Would we be safe in Baranovich? What would happen to my brothers? Would they have to go to fight? How would more change and disruption affect our lives?

Refugees began pouring into Baranovich. These were people, who were able to flee either from Germany or from the western areas of Poland, which were close to the German border. My parents opened their home. They took in as many Jews seeking a safe haven as they could. Our supplies of food for the winter were shared as were other necessities including clothing if it were needed.

It wasn't long before the bombing started in Baranovich. We had no choice but to flee our home, as did so many others. We loaded ourselves into wagons along with some of the refugees who had been sharing our home. Father decided the best thing to do was to seek shelter with my Grandparents in Lanyeh. With the border changes, Lanyeh seemed a safer place to be as it was closer to the Russian border. My Grandparents welcomed everyone in with open arms.

Our sense of security in Lanyeh did not last very long. Soviet artillery units arrived in the area. Our sense of fear grew as parachutists landed near the house. Yaacov spied supply parachutes dropping onto the farm as well. We thought that fighting would surely take place on our doorstep.

The bombs in Baranovich were frightening but the idea that fighting could take place where I had nothing but wonderful memories scared me even more. My fear and that of Yaacov must have been visible on our faces. "Don't worry," our parents assured us. "Nothing will happen as long as we are together. We will be all right," assured my Grandparents. I believe they had been trying to assuage our fears and no doubt their own as well.

What we did not know at the time was that Germany and the Soviet Union had signed the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact or the Nazi-Soviet Pact on August 23, 1939. Named for the foreign ministers that signed the document, this pact contained many articles. Primarily this agreement was a nonaggression pact, which was to be in place for ten years. As part of the nonaggression agreement it was agreed not to attack one another as well as not to support anyone who attack either signer of the treaty. It also contained a secret element, which split various European countries between the two nations. The

economic agreement stated that the Soviet Union agreed to make available cereals and other foodstuffs as well as raw materials to Germany.

The pact affected Poland as it was divided into two segments with the western part of the country coming under German domination and the eastern part coming under Soviet rule. Belarus became part of the Soviet Union. The arriving Soviet military was there to oversee the Soviet claim to this territory. Our initial fear of fighting was unfounded.

Soviet officials explained their arrival assuring my Father that it was perfectly safe for us to return to Baranovich. As my parents' business interests were there, we readied ourselves for another wagon trip. Some of the refugees chose to return with us. Some decided to remain in the Lanyeh area or to move on from there. Grandma packed packages of food for the trip. We kissed my Grandparents goodbye amid tears and extra long hugs. We did not know when we would be together again.

The city of Baranovich seemed relatively unchanged despite the bombing. People were relieved not to have to deal with the Nazi regime. However, we were not prepared for the great changes the Jewish community and the community at large was to experience under the Soviet regime. The freedom people were accustomed to as Polish citizens disappeared. The Soviets sent Russian citizens to Baranovich to take over the government functions. Jewish businesses were closed. Those that were large economic concerns were nationalized. The merchandise in Jewish owned stores was cleared out with the goods sent either to the Soviet Union or to Germany. The same was true for non-Jewish businesses. By taking everything away from the rich, the rich became the poor. The poor became the *machers*, the important people in the town. Some people

were employed by the Soviets. Some continued with their trades. Artisans were organized into cooperatives. Some small stores were allowed to continue to operate. My parents' store remained open with a meager stock to sell.

The Soviet regime ordered all Jewish and community organizations disbanded. All political activities were forbidden. Youth organizations, especially those with political ties, were forced to end their activities. Some Zionist groups felt they could not adhere to this decree; therefore, they went underground in an attempt to continue to exist. Some youth groups fled to Vilna, which was then part of Lithuania, where they could function freely. Any open practice of Zionism, for example, would have led to imprisonment. Any overt teaching of Hebrew or Judaism was also punishable by arrest and imprisonment. Therefore, all Jewish schools except for one high school were ordered to close. The Tarbut School closed its doors before I ever had my chance to teach there. The school became a Russian institution. I felt cheated. I was so upset and angry that I would not have the opportunity to use the degree I had worked so hard to obtain. What I would do for employment if I could no longer teach?

Although we all spoke Yiddish and Polish, it seemed logical and wise to learn to speak both Russian and White Russian with the Soviet Union overseeing our part of Poland. It was decided that I would take formal lessons and teach the rest of the family. I found a teacher, Mrs. Sherko, among the Russians who occupied the town who was willing to teach me the languages. The two languages are quite distinct. Russian is a softer language with fewer guttural sounds than White Russian. The sentence structure of the two languages is contradictory and the pronunciation different. To learn to speak both Russian and White Russian at the same time was thought to be crazy. I was told I

would be terribly confused. I was advised to learn one language and later to learn the other. I felt I had nothing to loose by attempting to learn them simultaneously. Luckily for me, languages have always come easily. I learned them rapidly much to the amazement of my teacher.

Although Bubie did not like the changes imposed on the Jewish community by the Soviet takeover, she saw this as an opportunity for her to fulfill her desire to be with her other children. One evening at dinner she announced, "I have decided that it is time for me to go to Russia. I want to live with Isaac and Shifra. I have been with you all these years. Now there is no reason I can not travel to Russia. I am going to do it! Do not try to argue with me. My mind is made up".

I do not think that Mother was too surprised by Bubie's decision. It was after all the fulfillment of a long held desire. "My only objection", said Mother, "would be for you to make the trip by yourself. I will make the arrangements for you, Nina and I to make the trip together to Russia."

We boarded the train in early 1940. Our excitement was palpable. This was to be a true adventure.

The reunion of Mother and children, sister and siblings was overwhelming. There were hugs, kisses, and tears with everyone talking at once. We divided our time with both families.

Aunt Shifra was married to a man whose last name was Krevorshan. She had had three children, Laura and Adik, and a child who died in infancy. Uncle Isaac and his wife Fanya, had three sons. Uncle Isaac held a very responsible job as the administrator of a large granary operation.

I enjoyed my time with my young cousins. There was so much to tell them about our family and where we lived. They in turn taught me a lot about their lives and surroundings. I was sorry that my brothers did not have this opportunity to be with our cousins.

Our time together was wonderful. Mother and I wished our visit could have lasted longer, but we had to return to Baranovich. Our departure was filled with sadness and trepidation. We did not know when we would be able to return. Mother worried that Bubie would not adjust to life in a new place at her age. We both wondered what life would be like for us without Bubie in our daily midst.

We eagerly awaited Bubie's letters. Her first letters related how disappointed she was with the lack of Yiddeshkeit and Jewish observance she found in Russia. She said something to the effect that it wasn't a kosher place. Despite her complaints, she did not indicate she wanted to come back to Baranovich.

Not long after our return from Russia, we received a letter bearing terrible news. Uncle Isaac was murdered. The men who worked for him at the granary killed him because of his open anti-Nazi sentiments. The family including Bubie assured us that they were all right.

Mother was terribly upset. She sat in mourning for the *shiva* period. Despite their assurances, Mother was worried about the family. She also voiced her feeling that she and Bubie had been fortunate to have been reunited with Isaac before this harrowing turn of events.

In the summer of 1940, Jewish refugees from western Poland who had come to our town seeking a safe haven found themselves being deported to the interior regions of

the Soviet Union. This relocation movement also affected others in our community. The Soviets began distributing numbers called *paragraph*. Whoever got the number eleven was sent to Siberia. Generally wealthy families were singled out and given paragraph eleven papers. The Soviets would take all their belongings and send what they confiscated to other areas.

Much to our shock and dismay, my parents received *paragraph* eleven papers with orders to ready themselves to leave. We could not understand why they should be selected, as our parents did not fit the profile as we knew it. Because we were considered adults, my brothers and I were not included in this relocation order. I was a little more than 19 years of age. I saw my world falling apart. As only the impetuousness of youth allows, I decided I had to do something. I could not stand by idly and let my parents be exiled to Siberia. I knew my chances were very slim that I could do anything to get this order changed. I approached one of my Russian language teachers.

"I have a great favor to ask of you," I said. "I realize what I am about to ask may be impossible. I also realize that you may not wish to help me, but I still must ask. My parents have been ordered to Siberia. Is there anything your husband can to prevent this from happening?"

"I can ask," she replied. "I do not know if he will be willing to try."

A few days passed. I told no one what I had done. I was very nervous and upset at the prospect of their deportation. Everyone in the community knew that my parents had received the exile order to Siberia, as had others.

An official document was delivered to our home. It rescinded the original *paragraph* eleven order. We were all so excited and relieved.

I returned to my teacher. "No words can adequately express my thanks to you and to your husband for your intervention on my parents behalf. I will always be in your debt." I wanted to inquire how he had managed this miracle, but I dared not ask.

When word spread through the community, people were genuinely happy for us. Some expressed their envy of our good fortune. As for me I was thrilled to have succeeded in keeping the family together. If only I had known then what I know now, I would not have gotten the officials to change the order. Maybe in Siberia my parents would have had a better chance of surviving the war.

It was very important for me to find a means of earning money to help contribute to the welfare of the family. The career I had trained for was useless at this time as teaching Hebrew or Jewish studies was punishable by arrest and exile to Siberia. I had just helped my parents avoid that situation. I could not chance my own expulsion. I had to start over.

Again I benefited from my connections. I had maintained a good relationship with Mrs. Sherko, who had taught me to speak White Russian. I approached her. "Do you think your husband might know of a job I could obtain?"

A short time later she told me to contact him at the Soviet Treasury Department in Baranovich. Mr. Sherko interviewed me, hiring me as a secretary. After I had been there for a while, Mr. Sherko came to speak with me. "I see you are a hard, dedicated worker. I would like you to learn bookkeeping. If you agree, I will send you to a course of study."

I needed a new trade. I always enjoyed mathematics when I had been a student. I had nothing to loose and everything to gain. I agreed.

Lida was a distance away. As promised, Mr. Sherko arranged for my transportation, and accommodations, which included meals. Not only did I learn the ins and outs of bookkeeping, but I also learned to drink beer! Lida was famous for its beer and beer was served with every meal. When I returned home, I proudly told my family how worldly I was for now I had acquired a taste for beer!

I became a very successful bookkeeper. I worked for two years in that position in the Soviet Treasury Department. I didn't love it, but that did not matter. I didn't love it because I had to work with figures all the time instead of with people. My first love was dealing with people and helping to shape minds. But the job was important to survival so I did it with no complaint.

Pooling our incomes provided the family with enough funds for us to manage to survive. I was employed. My brother Shalom worked in a radio station. My parents had a kiosk where they sold various things. My brother Bomkeh also did bookkeeping. Yaacov continued his education.

Sometime in mid or late 1940, Bomkeh was mobilized to the Soviet army and sent to Kandalaksha. It was very far north not too far from Finland. He wrote regularly telling us about himself.

Dear Family:

Kandalkasha is unforgiving place. It is very cold and the days seem so long because they are so strange! There is only two hours of daylight. The rest of the time it is as black as night. I find myself depressed not knowing if it is day or night. I feel as if I could do nothing but sleep. But sleep is a precious commodity, as the Army requires

many things of us. The training is difficult, that is all I can say. I do not know where we will go from here. It has to be better than the dark days here in Kandalaksha!

I hope every one is well at home. I think of you all very often.

Love,

Bomkeh

Mother replied in part:

As to your complaints about Kandalksha, do you have any choice where you are stationed? It is what it is. No one said you have to like it, but you must learn to deal with the dark conditions such as they are. Your Father and I pray that this should be the worst thing you have to learn to contend with.

He must have listened to her advice, as his letters no longer voiced this complaint. Soon there were no more letters. My parents worried constantly about him. Where was he? Was he safe? Was he injured? It was a long time before we learned that Bomkeh had been sent to the front in Leningrad. If he had been elsewhere, we did not know.

Those who remained in Baranovich experienced none of the conflicts of war for two years. There was food rationing but no war. There were restrictions but no war. Considering what was happening elsewhere, we had to consider ourselves fortunate.

Chapter 4

The year was 1941. Nazi Germany began its invasion of Soviet territory on June 22, negating the Ribbentrop-Molotov Nonaggression Pact. As a result of this action, the Soviet military was ordered to pull out of Baranovich and return to defend the borders of the Soviet Union.

It did not take long for the Germans to begin bombing Baranovich. Whoever could escape toward the Soviet Union did so in the hopes of leaving the bombing and the fighting which was surely to follow behind them.

It had always been my parents' plan to leave for Lanyeh should trouble rear its ugly head again. Their intention was for us to go together. However, as an employee with the Soviet Treasury Department I was prevented from leaving.

I unhappily anticipated what was about to happen. My Mother came to the Treasury. It was housed in a building located not far from the town center. She was visible upset.

"Ninachka," she said with tears in her eyes. "If only I knew how to remain with you and still be with your Father and Yaacov. I am so torn. I wish I could be in two places at once, but I can't.

I packed this valise with your documents and papers as well as some zlotys. Should you need your identification or money, they are in your possession. Guard them carefully. In this large bag I put your heavy winter coat with the fur collar, your winter boots, nightgowns, some underwear, some sheets, a pillow and a quilted blanket, some fabric and a few other things I thought you might need.

I know we will be together very soon. May God bless you."

We hugged and kissed and cried. She tried to hide her despair as she left me. I was upset and frightened. I had never been separated from my parents other than when I went to Vilna to study. This was very different. I prayed my Mother was right that we would all be reunited shortly.

The next night I was at the Treasury Department. The windows were blackened giving the office an incredible ominous feeling. There were many people on the main floor of the building. I think most had come there to seek shelter from the bombings, as this building appeared to be a sturdier, safer place than wooden houses. I was in an office on the second floor of the building. That night my job was to man the telephones in the office. Henyik Tannenbaum, a Jewish refugee who had come to Baranovich, was the head bookkeeper and my supervisor.

We had been there for quite a while. The noise from the constantly falling bombs was horrific. We could hear the cries of the people downstairs. I tried to contain my fear and not cry out. It became somewhat quieter. I was very tired. Sheer exhaustion must have over taken me as I some how fell asleep using my arms for my pillow on the desktop.

Henyik woke me. "Listen," he said. "It seems too quiet."

It was abnormally quiet. I listened for sounds. There were none: no people, no bombs, nothing. I looked at him questioningly.

"Come," he said. "We need to see what is going on."

I picked up the valise and carried it with me. I could hear my heart beating as

we crept down the stairs, carefully, quietly. No one was there. No one was visible outside either. We ventured out of the door heading toward the town center. A bus stood there.

Henyik asked the driver, "Where is everyone? Why are you here? Where are you going?"

He replied, "Get on! There is a train waiting to transport people into Russia. Others have already gotten on."

Henyik and I got on the bus. He and I were the only passengers. "Henyik," I said. "I need to go back for the big bag Mother brought me. The bus must be waiting for other people to come. Here, take my valise," I said knowing I could trust him with it. "I'll be right back," I told him. "Don't let the bus leave without me." I didn't wait for a response. I got off the bus and ran back to the Treasury.

I grabbed my bag. Suddenly the respite was over. Bombs were falling again. I had no choice but to remain inside the Treasury building. It seemed like an eternity. As scared as I was, the minute that there seemed to a break in the bombing, I ran back to the bus dragging the bag. It was gone. I couldn't believe it! The bus was gone! Henyik was gone. My valise was gone. My papers, my documents and my money were gone. My family was gone. I was alone. I stood alone on the street with a sack of clothes and other miscellaneous things. I did not know what to do. I was very frightened and bewildered. I think that perhaps I was in shock. To this day, I don't know how long I stood there or if I was crying or whether I did anything.

The next thing I remember was a truck stopping next to me. I heard Mr. Sherko's voice. "Nina, what are you doing out here on the street?"

I must have told him, "I am all alone. I don't know what I am going to do."

"You will come with us," he responded.

Immediately the other Russians on the truck began to argue with him. They did not want to take me, as I was not one of them. How he convinced them, I don't know. With hands outstretched to help me, I climbed in pulling my sack with me. I held it tight. It was my only connection to my family. The truck was an open military vehicle. We were packed into it like sardines in a can. We alternated sitting and standing. I was on the truck with them three long days and three long nights. We traveled with bombs dropping around us and through fires caused by the bombs. There was no escape. Bombs fell constantly. My fear was unimaginable.

I tried to keep myself from thinking about the bombs and the possibilities of what could happen should the truck be hit. I tried not to think about being injured or killed. I had to force myself to concentrate on something else. I began to think about the escape route the truck would take. In my wishful thinking, I decided that the truck would travel from Baranovich to Lanyeh. It seemed a logical route to me. Once it arrived in Lanyeh, I planned to thank Mr. Sherko and the others, get out of the truck and be reunited with my family. I was wrong. The escape route took us from Baranovich to Bobruysk, never going anywhere near Lanyeh. From Bobruysk we traveled to Bryansk where Soviet officials gathered refugees. We stopped in this place. "You need to remain here, Nina. Good luck to you," said Mr. Sherko. He helped me down from the truck while someone else threw my sack to the ground. The truck rumbled out bound for a destination unknown to me. I was left there to fend for myself.

For the second time in three days, I was alone, not knowing what to do or where to go next. I knew I could not go back to Baranovich. I had already seen some of the destruction caused by the bombing. There was no one to go back to. Bomkeh was in the army. Shalom was working in a radio station some distance from Baranovich. My parents and Yaacov I hoped had made it safely to Lanyeh. My only thoughts were to be reunited with them. I decided that I would somehow make my way to Lanyeh. How I was going to accomplish this daunting task never entered my mind. I was just going to do it.

So many refugees had gathered in this place trying to escape the German bombing. I was so focused on my plans, I never thought to look for anyone I knew. Much to my surprise, I stumbled upon the mother and two sisters of a friend of one of my brothers. She inquired where the rest of my family was. I told her my tale. She responded, "You'll go with us wherever we go." She reminded me of Ruth and Naomi in the Bible.

Soon after I met a couple whom Shalom had brought home for a visit. He had worked with my brother as an engineer at the radio station. After similar inquiries, they told me the same thing.

They all discouraged me from going back. "It is too dangerous, too long a journey for a young woman by herself. You realize don't you that there was a good chance that your family might not be there, that they might have had to move on to escape the bombing? What will you do if that were the case? How will you know where to look for them next? Who will help you in Lanyeh? Stay with us, Nina. It is the best thing to do."

In my heart of hearts I knew they were right. Remaining with them was probably the smartest and my best course of action. The questions they raised were good ones, yet my emotions told me I should still try to go back. I was very torn between the rational argument and the emotional one.

Chapter 5

At that time a transport was organized to go deep into the Soviet Union. My Baranovich acquaintances told me they were going on the first train they could get on. I do not know whether anyone really had any choice. I went with them. Cattle cars provided our means of transportation. We boarded one of them. We were crowded together with many other people who found themselves in the same questionable position. I have no idea how many individuals were in our car.

I was young and relatively strong. I stood for five days and five nights in the cramped cattle car with my sack at my feet. To pass the time people talked. They talked about the places they came from. They speculated what would happen. Fears were voiced. People tried to reassure and comfort one another with words. Sometimes a muffled melody could be heard. Sometimes one could hear muffled cries. Sometimes only the clickety clack of the train's wheels on the track could be heard.

The train made stops in many places. The villagers would bring food and drink to the train to sell or to barter. We would get hot water. Whoever could trade with the peasants did so to get food. I traded some things from the sack for food. Little had I known that the contents of that big bag would come to save my life more that once.

On the sixth day, the people around me decided I had stood long enough. There was a shelf of some sort near the roof of the cattle car. They cleared some bundles from it, hoisting me up there with my sack, as I would not let go of it. In the process I hit my head on something quite hard. A very large swelling resulted on my forehead over my right eye. It hurt, but exhaustion outweighed the pain. I slept. The lump took many months to go away.

After a week of travel the transport arrived at its destination, a railroad center in the city of Kuybyshev. We were so happy to be alive and to finally be able to get out of the cramped cattle car. I remember gulping the fresh air as it hit my face. You cannot imagine what the conditions had been. You cannot imagine the smells or the discomfort that was experienced. Would Kuybyshev place be a safe haven? Would we have to move on from here? I did not know what to expect being one of a great influx of refugees. Much to my surprise and relief, the Russians welcomed us warmly. We were cared for. They provided some food and a place for us to rest and to wash up. I had a pillow and quilted blanket from my bag to keep me comfortable. I was so grateful for the kindness that they displayed.

We had a few days of rest and time to explore the city. It was located on the left bank of the Volga River at the mouth of the Samara River. Soviet officials began to order people from our transport to the outlying villages to work. My brother's friend and I were sent to work on a collective farm along the Volga. It did not take me long to know that this kind of work was not for me. He felt the same way. We knew that there had to be something else for us to do. We decided that early in the morning we would find a boat to take us up the Volga to Kuybyshev. The plan was to try to gain employment there. We had no money and no food. We did have the daring of the young. We approached the captain of a boat hoping to arrange transportation and deferred payment for his services. He was a good-hearted person. He took us on board and fed us. He returned us to Kuybyshev refusing any compensation of any sort. We were most grateful to him. Had he not been so kind, I don't know how our plan would have been set into motion.

I found myself on the street again. What I would do to survive I did not know. I pondered how and where I was going to get a job. I had made my decision and now I had to live with its consequences. Suddenly, I heard my name being called. I turned. Across the street was a lady whom I recognized. She had married a druggist from Baranovich. We greeted each other warmly. "It is so good to see a face from home. Maybe you know what has happened to my husband and my son? I haven't seen them or heard from them in a long time."

Unfortunately, I had no information to share with her. I asked her, "How did you get to Kuybyshev?"

"I came before the war started to be with my Father, a pediatrician here, was not well. When it was time to return home, I could not make any travel arrangements. I was told travel for a non-military person was impossible. I had no choice but to remain. Every day I pray that my husband and my son will join me. Now tell me about your family and how you arrived in Kuybyshev." I told her my story.

" You are alone," she said. You must come and stay with my Father and myself."

I accepted her generous offer. They were most hospitable but I felt uncomfortable taking advantage of what little they themselves had. I knew I had to somehow find employment and be on my own.

I went to the local Treasury Department offices hoping to find work. They turned me away telling me that there were no jobs available as the central government from Moscow was relocating to Kuybyshev to distance itself from the fighting.

I was never one to give up. I went back the next day. My *mazel,* my good fortune, was with me once again. Attached to a government agency was a teacher from

the bookkeeping course in Lida. He recognized me. "Ninachka, what are you doing here? How did you get here?"

I briefly told me my story.

"I remember you were a good student. You are in search of a job, you said? I will be glad to recommend you."

His recommendation gave such a glowing report; I couldn't believe he was writing about me. Not only did he say that I had been an exceptionally good student but that I was a very good worker. As it turned out, his recommendation carried a great deal of weight as he held a high position of influence. I was offered a job as a bookkeeper and was told I could start right away. Much to my amazement, I was asked if I had a preference where I would be assigned. I probably should have said wherever you need me. Instead in my naiveté, I responded somewhere quiet and restful. Somewhere I can try to forget all of my troubles for a little while. I was told there was a position in a village not far from Kuybyshev that came close to my description. I looked forward to being in a peaceful setting with a place to live and an office to work in.

I returned to the lady from Baranovich and her father, explaining to them that I had secured a position that would take me away from Kuybyshev. I thanked them for their gracious hospitality. Both of them wished me well and told me should I ever need their help not to hesitate to contact them.

Before I left for my job in the village, I went to the information exchange. It was a place where refugees posted information about people they had met and posted inquiries. I went with hopes of finding out something about my family. I was unsuccessful. There was no news of anyone in my family. As far as I knew I was alone.

I was about to leave the area when I recognized a young woman with a child. She was the widow of one of my teachers, Moshe Gavzeh. I went over and introduced myself. I was certain she would not know who I was.

"Yes," she said. "I remember you. Please call me Rifkah." Kneeling down she said, "This is my daughter Miriam. Miriam, please say hello to Nina." Miriam looked at me shyly initially hiding herself behind her Mother's skirt.

"How old are you, Miriam?" I asked hoping to coax a few words and perhaps a smile from her. She held up three fingers in response.

Rifkah questioned how I had arrived in Kuybyshev. Once again I related my story. "So you are alone also," she commented.

After a moment I asked, "How are you managing by yourself?"

"It isn't easy. Finding work is very difficult at best. But having no one to care for my daughter limits my prospects greatly. Somehow we manage to carry on day to day," she responded. The sound of uncertainty and sadness echoed in her voice.

We both stood there staring at one another. Both of us were thinking, perhaps of the past but more likely of what the future held.

"Nina, I am older than you are by perhaps ten years. We are both from Baranovich. We are both alone. We must both fend for ourselves. I believe we were meant to have found one another. Chance brought us together. We should remain together. Wherever you go, Nina, I will go. Wherever I go, you will go."

Her words rang true to my ears. Perhaps I just needed to know there was someone else I could relate to and I hoped rely upon. I agreed. I made a commitment to Rifkah and therefore to Miriam. Rifkah and I became "war sisters." This day marked

the beginning of a relationship that helped me get through the war and was to last the remainder of our lives.

I told Rifkah about my new position. Now I needed to find a way to have them go with me. Full of confidence and schemes, I returned to my bookkeeping teacher. I presented my case dramatically with a hint of tears in my eyes. I said to him," You'll never believe what happened to me! I went to the information exchange to see if there was any news of my family. Miracle of miracles who should I find there but my sister and my niece. Now that we have been reunited, we must stay together. My sister is widowed and there is no one else to care for them but me. It would be possible, wouldn't it, for them to go with me to the village?" He smiled at me agreeing to allow them to go with me.

Chapter 6

When it was time to leave for the village, a wagon pulled by a pair of horses arrived to fetch our few belongings and us.

The village was a small resort. We were given a room to live in and I was given an office to work from. Again my experience as a bookkeeper aided our survival. I worked September, October and into November. We were well treated by the people living there. We were hungry most of the time as were the villagers. There was little food available to eat, but we had a roof over our heads so we were protected from the cold and from inclement weather. Things were far from easy but they could have been a lot worse.

Initially it upset me that I had to work on Shabbat and was unable to observe the holidays. I came to realize that survival was the number one priority. In order to survive, I no choice but to work on these days. My philosophy became one did what one had to do to survive each day. Sometimes on Friday night, I would secretly light candles in a sheltered place, say the blessing to myself, and extinguish them. I did not let the candles burn so that the Russian neighbors would not see. It was neither smart nor safe to openly flaunt your being Jewish. It saddened me, but I had the comfort of doing the best I could do under the circumstances. I had made the decision that if I could not observe Shabbat and the holidays I would at least observe kashrut. There was little meat available to eat no matter who you were. Fruits and vegetables and bread would serve me well enough.

One day Rifkah received a forwarded letter from a Mr. Millenbaum. How he knew she had been in Kuybyshev I never thought to ask. Millenbaum, a refugee to

Poland, became a friend of her late husband when they had taught together at the Tarbut School. Millenbaum had been a geography teacher until the war started. Under the Soviet occupation, he continued to teach geography although he was assigned to another school. The letter was postmarked in a town called Alma Ata, not far from the Chinese border in Kazakhstan. How he got to Asia I do not know. People ran from the troubles, from the disasters that were all around them. Many lost their lives. Those of us who survived were lucky.

In part of his letter he wrote:

"Rifkah, think it through. You have managed to save yourself and Miriam until this point in time. Why stay there? With almost certainty the war will inch its way toward Kuybyshev. I truly believe you are endangering yourselves. You both may be killed, if not by actual warfare then by the harsh winter that will arrive before much longer. You realize don't you, that once the Volga and the Samara freeze, Kuybyshev will be cut off. I know food is scarce. It will only become more so with the onset of winter. My other great concern for both of you will be the freezing winter weather. Do you have enough warm clothing to deal with the conditions? Do you and Miriam have sufficient shelter to keep you warm?

Please consider carefully what I have said. Please leave there and come to Alma Alta as quickly as you can. I will be greatly relieved if you were to do so. I would be glad to help you in any way that I can."

Rifkah shared the letter with me. It was obvious that he was worried about her and Miriam. It was also evident he had a broader perspective of what was occurring. We discussed the letter. If what he said were true, would we face more difficulty in a

small village than in a large town? We discussed how we had survived thus far. We debated what would we do. Should we go? Should we stay? We spent many hours pondering our situation. Finally we decided Millenbaum's argument made sense. We should leave. Now we had to plan how to make this change occur. What a story we dreamt up! I wrote a letter that was supposed to have come from Millenbaum.

Dear Rifkah and Nina:

I hope this letter finds you and Miriam well. I am in a village near Alma Ata in southeastern Kazakhstan. Things here aren't too bad.

But to the news that I know you will find most exciting. On a trip into Alma Ata, I found your parents! I introduced myself to them, as I was sure they would not remember me. They seem to he holding their own having only arrived here recently. I did not have your address with me; therefore, I promised them I would write you immediately upon my return to Issyk.

I know that they would do far better with their daughters and grandchild by their side. I hope and pray that you will be able to join them there in the very near future. I am certain that with your care they will flourish.

I am looking forward to seeing you soon. Good luck on your journey. Attached is the information you will need to find them.

Your friend,

Millenbaum

I gave the letter to my supervisor certain that he would understand and let me go right away. He told me, "I am pleased that you have received such good news. I understand your desire to be reunited with family; however, I have to look out for the

best interests of the government. Therefore I cannot allow you to leave until you find and train a replacement. You are doing such a good job I will need carbon copy of you, that is someone that could do the job equally well. When this requirement is fulfilled, I will permit you to go."

At first I was a bit taken back. Then I set out to find my replacement. I found a woman who was willing to learn. She was an able student and I taught her what had to be done. I kept my part of the bargain. I made them as close a duplicate of myself as I could.

Finally it was time to leave. I received a glowing written recommendation to the head of the Treasury Department in Alma Ata. This recommendation was something I had not anticipated. I was very thankful for it. I hoped there would be a place for me once I arrived. My supervisor also gave me an address in Alma Ata so we would have a contact if we need help in the process of locating our parents. I had done a convincing job.

Now a new problem faced us. How would we get from Kuybyshev to Alma Ata? It was a long, long distance between cities. Because of the war free travel was not possible. I remembered the offer made by the woman from Baranovich. I went to her sharing the same story I had told my supervisor. I felt she might help us more readily using this story. I also felt that consistency in relating our urgent need to move on was important for our safety and perhaps hers.

She was so pleased for me, she agreed to help without hesitation. What her connections were remained unknown to me. During the war years it was better not to ask too many questions. Sometimes the less you knew, the better off you were. All I know

is that she accomplished the impossible. She concocted a story to enable us to move on. She explained to her contact that Rifkah and I were actresses who had stopped in Kuybyshev on the way to Alma Ata to entertain troops. We could not picture ourselves as actress! Two former teachers, one an active bookkeeper, posing as actresses, it seemed like a comedy. However funny it seemed to us, by doing this she was able to get us train tickets on a military transport to Alma Ata. We thanked her and wished her well. We gathered our belongings. Holding Miriam tightly between us, we left.

It was a military transport. There were no accommodations for women. An area was cleared on the top row of "bunks" for us to share. The "bunks" were benches to sit on and to use as a sleep platform.

I was told that I was a good-looking woman when I was young. I don't know. Maybe it was so. I was petite and slender with long thick dark hair. During the trip, a pilot kept talking to me and flirting. It was commonplace for a military man to have a sweetheart or someone to write to or think of. Rifkah teased me long after this encounter that he had fallen in love with me and was looking for me every time he went out on a mission. How we laughed about it.

After nearly a week on the transport, we arrived in Alma Ata. The people there were very compassionate. The man at the address I was given took us in, gave us food, and a place to sleep.

Millenbaum's village, Issyk, was some fifty miles from Alma Ata. We were in Alma Ata a week. It was a very big, pretty city. It is called Alma Ata as in the native tongue it refers to the very large apples that grew there. The fruits were delicious to eat. Fruit was something we hadn't seen in a long time. There were also vineyards in Alma

Ata. It was easier to obtain food than it was in Kuybyshev. Still we learned that many refugees died in Alma Ata from hunger and from exposure to the weather as they had where we had come from. We left Alma Ata for Issyk in a big long wagon pulled by bulls.

Millenbaum lived in a small village home, the main room dominated by a very large oven. When we arrived the sight before us was one I will never forget. Millenbaum was stretched out on a bench. He was using his hat for a pillow and maps for his blanket. Rifkah and I had a difficult time holding our laughter back. He was so delighted that we had followed his advice. He could not seem to do enough to make us feel welcome. That night the top of that very large oven served as our bed.

As soon as I could, I went armed with the letter of recommendation to seek employment in the Treasury Department of the village. I got a job as a bookkeeper. I was so lucky to have been hired. Rifkah found work as a teacher. She was delighted to be working in her field again. We felt that life was going to be good in Issyk. We stayed there for somewhat more than a year.

Our first real quarters in Issyk were with a family who had four children. We rented one very tiny room containing three cots and some shelves. The head of the household was named Igor. The man was a drunk who cursed terribly and kept a rifle next to his bed. We were afraid that he would come home drunk one night and kill us. Therefore whenever it was possible, when Igor would come home, we would leave. One very warm night, we slept with the windows open. My handbag was out and in it was a key to Treasury Department. Suddenly I awoke to see my purse moving across the table.

I don't know who stole it. I only saw the shadow of a head on the wall. I felt that the theft was a sign for us to get out of that house.

With great trepidation I went to work the next day. I told my supervisors what had happened. Much to my surprise, no one got angry. I was told the key was replaceable. They agreed we needed to move out of those quarters. The people from the Treasury helped us to find a little apartment. We moved out of Igor's home with great relief. The stolen purse incident turned out to have a golden lining!

We continued to see Millenbaum regularly. He never relaxed and was always planning ahead. Millenbaum felt that if things worsened in Issyk the way to escape was over the mountains into China. He urged us to join him if escape became necessary.

The view from Issyk was magnificent. You could see the tall peaks of the Tyen Shan Mountains. The mountains were green with spruce and fir trees. There were also deep breathtaking canyons. Nestled in the mountain was a magnificent lake, Issyk-kul. It never froze, as the water was salty. It was a wonderful place to go to sit and think.

Hunger was a common denominator in the village as it was all around us. Food was very scarce. Rifkah would cut Miriam's meager rations into three portions so she wouldn't eat it all at once. I worried that Miriam would not have enough nourishment so she could grow. I gave Miriam half of whatever I had. Some times I gave her all of it. If I was fortunate, when I traveled to the little villages around Issyk to check on the paperwork of different collective farms for the Treasury Department, I was able to get some butter, cheese, vegetables or potatoes from the villagers to bring back. Often it was enough food for us to survive another week. I always shared this, making sure Miriam got half. I still had many things in the bag my Mother had given me in Baranovich. I

sold the nightgowns as wedding dresses to the local girls in exchange for bread or other food.

We turned the bit of land outside the house into a garden. There we were able to grow sunflowers. We ate some of the seeds and pressed the rest for their oil. Rifkah took some potatoes I had gotten in one of the villages to make *latkes,* pancakes. There weren't enough potatoes, so she made some using the potato peels. They must have been green or something, because Rifkah ate them and became very ill. Thank God she recovered.

We continued doing whatever was necessary in order to obtain extra food. We learned that if you were an entertainer you could obtain an extra *pieyok,* ration. As we had originally gotten to Alma Ata posing as actresses, it seemed natural for us to pursue this ruse. We publicized ourselves as singers although we were truly more like a vaudeville team! We sang and Rifkah told jokes. She was quite the comedienne! In the midst of all this *tzuris*, trouble, we managed to laugh, to keep a sense of humor and earn some extra food rations.

Like the rest of us, Millenbaum was always hungry. The difference was he became fixated on hunger and gripped about it all the time. I at least tried not to think about it. It was a fact of life. When you are constantly faced with terrible hunger, you must decide what you are willing to eat. Millenbaum was faced with this situation. Issyk had only one restaurant. It served one hot meal a day. One day Millenbaum heard that the restaurant had meat on its menu. He went and ate. He did not care that it was horsemeat. In his mind, food was food.

Meanwhile I worried there was something wrong with me. After all, how could I gain weight when I ate virtually nothing, sharing what little I had with Miriam? Rifkah

was also concerned. She found a doctor, a refugee from Moscow. While the doctor examined me, she asked many questions about my past and how I had eaten. She said my body was used to delicate food. The change in my body was due to my new eating habits. It was a relief to know that I was not ill.

Meanwhile the change in my appearance caused my coworkers to tease me. "Nina," they said. "Let us take your picture. We'll send the photographs to the soldiers fighting on the front. You will be an inspiration for them to do their best, to hurry to end this war. They will want to come home quickly to a girl like you."

Thankfully I had a good sense of humor. I laughed with them. There were so few occasions for laughter.

Chapter 7

1942. 1943. Rumors and stories began circulating regarding the actions of the Nazis in places Hitler had taken over. Who could believe it! My worries about my family grew stronger with each report. I worried about their survival, about their health. I worried about our home. Worry became my constant companion. For a young woman I felt as if I was carrying the weight of the world on my shoulders.

I cried a great deal. I cried for my brothers. I cried for my parents who I missed very much. Rifkah tried to prevent me from thinking bad thoughts. "What are you worrying for? Your parents are probably surviving better than you." When my tears would return she'd ask me, "Are you an old woman, bent and gray, with nothing better to do than worry?" She had a way to make me smile if only briefly.

Rifkah would not allow me to wallow in self-pity or to make myself depressed. When I voiced my concerns about the future, she tried to assure me that things would be all right. What else could she say? What else could one hope for? If you didn't have hope, how could you live from one day to the next? This was an important lesson for me to learn.

During this period, an attempt was made to organize Polish citizens in the Soviet Union to form a Polish resistance group, an unofficial Polish army. The ultimate objective was to regain Polish territory for Polish rule. If it meant fighting the Soviets to retake the homeland, so be it. A Polish general arrived in Issyk. The purpose of his visit was to recruit people for this undertaking. If one was unwilling to enlist to fight, he tried to get people to register their Polish citizenship as a means of showing strength and solidarity. The general used scare tactics to convince people that it was the proper thing

to do. He said that after the war the Soviets would not allow Polish citizens out of the country. As an enticement, he promised extra food rations for joining or registering.

I listened to his presentation and carefully thought about his words. Somehow this made no sense to me. Here I was living under Soviet rule. Granted it was wartime and things were difficult for everyone. Food and materials were scarce as a large portion went to the soldiers who were fighting. Despite this, I had been treated fairly. If I joined this resistance group or registered my support, it seemed to me it was a betrayal to those who had given me work, a roof over my head, and had at times shared what meager food they had.

Rifkah's view however was quite different. She was older and had involved herself politically prior to the outbreak of the war. She was an avowed communist. Right or wrong, she was concerned how this might affect her at the end of the war. To her way of thinking by registering her support, she might avoid a problem. She was also swayed by the general's food offer. She always worried about food for Miriam. Extra food was an enticement she found hard to resist. She remained a little leery about moving ahead and joining forces with this group until she met a Jewish man already affiliated with it. He listened to her comments recognizing Rifkah's weakness. It was her concern about food for Miriam. He used it in his argument to persuade her to register. She did. It was not long before this decision impacted her life, Miriam's and ultimately mine.

When it was learned that she had affiliated with the Polish resistance, Rifkah was dismissed from her teaching position and was arrested by Soviet officials. I did not know about the arrest initially. Rifkah somehow had a message delivered that she had been

sent unexpectedly to Alma Ata for something relating to her job. She knew I would automatically take care of Miriam.

I learned the truth when a hairdresser who knew us both came to see me. "Nina," she said. "I need to speak with you without Miriam hearing." In a whisper she continued, "I have just come from the jail where I saw Rifkah."

Her statement shocked me.

She continued, "Rifkah said no one is to know where she is. You must keep her whereabouts secret for her safety and Miriam's. She said for you to take care of yourself and give Miriam a kiss and hug for her."

Miriam therefore became my sole responsibility. I took care of her as if she were part of my family. I guess I had been caring for her all along, but now I did so not only for Miriam but also out of a sense of duty to Rifkah.

I could not stand by idly while Rifkah was jailed. Fool hardly or not, I went to see the man who had convinced her to be registered as a Polish citizen. I explained that Rifkah was incarcerated and why she had been arrested. Then I asked him what he could do to help her. He became visibly frightened. He sat in his seat not saying a word, just shaking his head. Finally, he said he could do nothing. Perhaps he was afraid that he too would be jailed. I did not know what else I could do.

My mind raced. What if Rifkah did not return from jail? How would I be able to care for Miriam and still do my job so we could have money to buy food? What would I do without Rifkah? She was my support in so many ways. Would I be able to survive without her? With the difference in our ages, she at times acted like a surrogate parent. I thought about the time when a typhus epidemic had struck. I was taken very ill.

People were being hospitalized in great numbers. Rifkah was insistent that she could take care of me at home. She did and I got well. Most of those who had been hospitalized died. She was there when I needed words of encouragement, assurance and inspiration. The thought of her not being there made me I realized how truly frightened I was.

That night Rifkah came home obviously shaken by her experience. I was shocked and relieved to see her walk through the door. Although I wanted to ask her a million questions, I didn't. I thought it best not to. Rifkah sat clinging to Miriam, tears rolling down her cheeks. I could not imagine what was going through her mind.

Once Miriam went to sleep, we sat together. Rifkah did not share the charges, which led to her arrest, nor what transpired that led to her release. Finally she said, " I do not know what I am to do, Nina. I am under orders to spy on my fellow Jews and then to report what they are saying. If I do not do this, they threatened our lives, that is Miriam's and mine. They told me we will never leave Issyk alive."

I didn't know what to say. Rifkah was very frightened. I was too. But I was also angry. How could anyone ask her to betray her Jewish friends and neighbors? I felt she could not fulfill this order. I had to come up with a way to prevent her from spying that would be believable.

Rifkah was suddenly totally exhausted. I helped her to bed. That was when the idea hit me. Rifkah had heart problems. Somehow I would get word spread that she was ill, too ill to leave her bed, too ill to do anything. It worked. After some time passed, I approached the authorities in Issyk to get permission for her to go to Alma Ata to the

hospital to seek doctors' help due to the severity of her illness. My story must have been convincing. Permission was granted. Rifkah went.

As I mentioned my job required my traveling to surrounding villages. These trips sometimes lasted several days. In one of these villages, I was stationed in the clinic. The doctor I shared a room with that night was a woman refugee from Leningrad. As we talked about Leningrad, I thought about Bomkeh.

I had a very restless night. I dreamt Rifkah had been shot. She had blood running down her back. I awoke the next morning badly shaken by my dream. I could not rid myself of a feeling of dread and sorrow.

An old Russian nurse whom I met the previous day asked, "Why are you so sad. What happened to you overnight?"

"I just had a restless night due a very unsettling dream." I replied.

"Tell me what you dreamt." She listened to me then interpreted my dream. "The person in your dream will give you information about someone of importance to you."

I did not know whether to believe her or not. The whole thing seemed far-fetched yet. But I thanked her and readied myself to return to Issyk.

Meanwhile Rifkah wrote from the hospital in Alma Ata.

Dear Nina,

I pray that you and Miriam are well. I am okay. I have something unbelievable to tell you. I met a doctor at the hospital who had been in Leningrad. We have spent a great deal of time talking and sharing our experiences. During one of our conversations, he related that a friend from the army in Leningrad had been in Alma Ata to visit with him. I told him you a brother who had been in Leningrad. When I told him the name, he

looked at me strangely. Bomkeh is the friend who had visited after having been released from the army! He explained the Soviet army kept non-Russians in separate units. When there was question about the loyalty of the Poles, they dismantled the unit. Bomkeh had to return to the working army for a while, but intends to return to Alma Ata. He is apparently okay from what the doctor has told me. I know how excited you will be when reading this. I have goose bumps just writing the words!

Love,

Rifkah

I reread the letter until I thought the ink would fade from the page. I could not believe Bomkeh had been so close. If I hadn't finagled to send Rifkah to the hospital, I would have never known. At least I now knew the fate of one of my brothers. I prayed he would remain safe and return to Alma Ata, hopefully with news of the rest of the family.

Once Rifkah returned from the hospital, I began to make regular trips to Alma Ata in the hope that Bomkeh would show up or that the doctor would have more information. A few months later, Bomkeh did return. He was not well. He was suffering from some sort of stomach ailment. His doctor friend treated him and sent word that I should go to Alma Ata, that Bomkeh was there.

The reunion was joyous. I had thought that I would never learn of him let alone ever see him alive. We could not let go of one another. He asked me about our family. I sadly told him I knew nothing, that I hoped he had news of them. We talked for hours on end. I told him my saga and he told his.

Bomkeh told me about fighting in the Leningrad Blockade. He said, "It was the worst of places. Many people, both civilians and military, were killed. There was no food. Some people were so desperate for food, they ate cats in order to stay alive. There was so much bombing. I t seemed as if each bomb had an address on it. I was amongst the lucky. When I had to connect lines for communications in the front of our group, the bombs fell towards the back. When I would be sent in another direction, the bombs went the other way. I was fortunate that none of the bombs had my address! The men in my unit teased me about this unbelievable luck"

Bomkeh stayed with Rifkah, Miriam and myself. The medicine he needed for recovery was rest and nourishment. Unfortunately, he could not stay as long as I would have liked. He had to return to the front once again.

It was an emotional departure. I prayed when Bomkeh left that he would be safe and that someday I would see him again. Knowing the conditions under which he worked in the army, seeing him again seemed unlikely.

The threats against Miriam and Rifkah continued. Whether verbal or written, the threat always said they would erase her daughter if she did not cooperate and then they would kill her.

I continued to cover up for her. I insisted that she remained very ill in spite of her treatments in Alma Ata. I clung fast to my belief that if she didn't go anywhere, she couldn't do anything; therefore she was out of harms way.

Chapter 8:

It was the end of 1942, or early 1943. As unexpectedly as I was reunited with Bomkeh, Rifkah learned that her brother, Yitzchak Goldberg, was in Samarkand in Uzbekistan. Letters were exchanged. Needless to say she was filled with joy and relief to know he was alive and well. He wanted Rifkah and Miriam to join him in Samarkand where he could care for them in the best manner possible.

Rifkah wrote him telling him about me, her war sister, and how we were taking care of one another. She indicated I would be with them when the time came to go to Samarkand. She informed him that our leaving Issyk would not be without complications although she did not spell out exacting what that meant.

Goldberg arrived in Issyk to get us and accompany us on the trip to Samarkand. Once Rifkah felt the time was right, she explained her affiliation with the Polish resistance and the threat that loomed over our heads. I suspect that he must have bribed someone. He never told us. The four of us left Issyk without incident and went to Samarkand. It was late 1943, early 1944.

Samarkand was a Muslim city located in the valley of the Zeravshan River. It had a mild climate and rich agricultural land. It was an ancient city that had once been part of the silk crossroads. The old city fascinated me with its maze of narrow winding streets and its colored domes. Many of the buildings were decorated with marble, mosaics or gold. There was a mosque called Bibi-Khamon that was magnificent with its turquoise cupola. It held a great fascination for me.

It was not until after we lived in the city for a while that I realized the wisdom of Millenbaum's words. We didn't have the clothing or the food to have survived the winter in Kuybyshev. I'm not sure how well we would have fared in Issyk in a harsh winter.

At first we all lived with Rifkah's brother in his tiny one room quarters. It was very cramped to say the least. No one complained but I knew that I had to find another place to live as soon as possible. It was time for me to be out on my own. I knew that Rifkah and I would always be close. I knew she was there for me when and if I needed her.

As soon as I secured a job, I moved out. My new home was something I would have never dreamed of. I lived in a clay hut! It was not very large but it was all one person needed. I had a small black stove to cook on or to use for warmth. I slept on a make shift cot on the floor. I found the hut very comfortable. I was on my own.

Again I was fortunate to find employment as a bookkeeper. This time I was employed in an *artel*, a clothing factory. The office and the factory were not located in the same building. The office was in town located on the third floor of a building. The only entrance to the office was by a staircase located on the outside wall of the building. One icy winter day I left the office a little bit earlier than the other employees did. I had only taken a few steps when all of a sudden I found myself slipping down all three flights of the staircase. I thought for sure that I would die. When I reached the bottom, I was shaken up but unhurt. How I escaped injury was inexplicable. All I could think of was that the warm coat I wore cushioned my fall. It was the coat my Mother had put in the sack when she left me in Baranovich. My fellow workers came running down the stairs

as quickly and as carefully as they could. They had heard me yelling as I fell. They called my escape from injury a miracle and used it as an excuse to throw a party!

Samarkand's *shuk* or open marketplace was marvelous especially after the difficulty we had getting sufficient food. The market offered so many choices. There were stands piled high with a wide variety of fruits and vegetables all grown locally. My mouth still waters as I recall the incredible grapes, sweet as candy and laden with juices. I had never seen grapes quite like those before nor since. The readily available produce made my vow to keep kosher by being a vegetarian an easy one to fulfill.

In the market as well as in other locations were shops called *chaikana*, tea places. Various types of teas were brewed to order and served piping hot. It was customary to drink the tea from deep saucers accompanied by dried fruits and raisins. Add to the tea and fruit, warm flat bread called *lipioshka*, which was similar to pita, and one had a delicious breakfast, snack or even a light dinner.

One had to be careful shopping in the *shuk*. One day I was about to make a purchase. I had my money in my hand when several children came along. While one was asking me a question, the other pulled the money from my hand. They both ran off as quickly as they could, getting lost in the crowd. This was not an unusual event. It had happened to others as well. Sometimes it was money. Sometimes it was your package. They stole whatever they could. They too had to survive.

The people of Samarkand struck me as very industrious individuals. Outside many houses were looms where fabrics and beautiful oriental rugs were woven. As you passed by, you were invited to stop to watch as hands moved deftly back and forth

creating a myriad of designs in a riot of color. Everything was for sale. So many beautiful things! It was a feast for the eye!

Samarkand was home to many refugees both Jews and non-Jews. This great melange of people hailed from a wide range of places, backgrounds and experiences. A very large Jewish community developed as a result of this influx. Within the community, people tended to gravitate to others from their hometown or from their area. Whenever you met someone from home a litany of questions was sure to follow. "Where did you come from? Where have you been? How did you get here? By chance, did you meet so and so in your travels? Do you have any information about so and so?"

Needless to say, I too inquired about my family. No one knew anything about them. It saddened me greatly. On the other hand it was good to be with people from Baranovich with whom to share memories and to share concerns. We became an informal support group, although we did not know this term.

My circle of friends widened both among people from my hometown as well as those from other places. It was here that I met Chaika Butansky and her brother. They also came from Baranovich although our paths had never crossed there. Our friendship blossomed immediately. They in turn introduced me to others they had met from Baranovich. It was a comfort to know I had Rifkah as well as these newly made friends to rely upon.

As I became acquainted with more and more people, someone introduced me to a Russian woman named Lilka. Lilka and I were close in age. In learning about one another, I shared that I had gone to Russia to visit family. She asked where I had been and whom I had visited. Immediately Lilka was smiling. To my great surprise, Lilka was

related to my Aunt Fanya, Uncle Isaac's wife. Although we were not directly related, it helped us to forge a strong bond. Lilka in turn introduced me to other people who were related to Aunt Fanya. There was a special feeling of warmth and caring between us. I had acquired an extended family. It felt wonderful.

Life continued on inspite of the war. Happy occasions were celebrated with special joy as there were few special times in our lives. A joyous occasion became a community event. Everyone contributed to the party that followed. When Chaika Butansky was married to Shalom Kastenbaum, I took Lilka to the wedding. She was so delighted to have the opportunity to attend a Jewish wedding. She had never been to a Jewish wedding before. There had been none for her to go to in Russia.

One night there was a knock on my door. I opened it to find Nathan Spilkowski and his wife Rodja, friends from Lida. I was so surprised to see them and to see them dressed in military uniforms. "Why are you dressed like that?" I asked.

" We have decided to play poker" they responded. In Polish *pokerrovach* means to turn around my destiny.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

He said, "I have to take care of my destiny." He explained, "We decided to join Anderson's Army, a Polish brigade organized to fight for Poland on Polish land. We have created false identities using Polish names. As Jews we would not accepted into this group. In a few weeks time, we will go to Kermaney to join the group for training and whatever may come."

My first reaction was they were crazy. I did not voice my opinion. Instead I asked, "Where will you stay until then?" They shrugged their shoulders. I had room. I invited them to stay with me. They did.

Our sources of information about the war came via recent immigrants, rumors or from what little were broadcasted on the radio. Reports started to filter through naming cities recaptured in Poland. Reactions to these reports were a blend of relief mixed with trepidation. I prayed that there would be news of my hometown. I decided I would leave for Baranovich as soon as I heard it had been recaptured.

One day it happened. I was very excited. I told everyone I planned to return immediately. I was strongly discouraged from doing so by each person. "Don't be impetuous," I was told. "You have no idea what you are returning to. There is still fighting. The war is not over, even if towns are being retaken. It is no doubt very dangerous to travel. A young woman traveling alone is foolish."

It was common knowledge that if one had the right papers, travel was difficult and iffy at best. Food could be a problem to obtain. There were times and places when a person could not even trade diamonds for bread! I knew, despite my burning desire to return and look for my family, that those around me offered sound advice even if it was not what I wanted to hear.

Instead of rushing there, I wrote a general letter of inquiry to Baranovich asking if anyone knew what had become of my family. I requested that anyone with any knowledge contact me in Samarkand. As God would have it, my brother Shalom left the partisans when the city was retaken. He found my letter and wrote me.

My dear Sister:

Thank God you are alive and I presume well. I was overjoyed to find your letter! I hope that this letter will find its way to you without delay.

I have some good news to share with you. I have married a lovely woman. Her name is Dorka. I am sure you will like her when you have the opportunity to meet.

As for me, you wouldn't recognize me. You remember me as a delicate boy. No more. Being a partisan in the woods changed me. I learned to shoot and to kill. I put grenades under trains or on the tracks to disrupt the lines. I learned to do things I would have never done in a normal life. Some might say that these experiences have made me a beast. You will have to judge for yourself.

You must come to Baranovich as soon as you can so that we can be together. I can get you a job in the Treasury Department here. I will send the papers you will need. The papers will help you to get a ticket to by train as it is still difficult to do as fighting continues.

Dorka and I would like to leave here, but do not know where we will go or when. We will <u>not</u> do so without you.

Please be in touch as soon as possible. I am very anxious to see you again.

Love,

Shalom

I was overjoyed to know he had survived and thrilled that he had married. I assumed he knew nothing about the rest of the family, as he included no information. I desperately wanted to leave. Yesterday would not have been soon enough only I didn't know what to do or how to make the necessary arrangements to leave Samarkand.

Meanwhile, Shalom surprised me by sending Dorka to Samarkand. We liked one another from the start. She told me how my brother had become an important person with the Soviets due to his bravery and actions as a partisan. He earned some kind of commendation as a result. It was through these connections, Shalom had been able to make arrangements not only to send Dorka with a pass good for several weeks, but with the needed paperwork for me to return with her. Shalom had been unable to get me a ticket for the return trip. I had to take care of that.

I was so excited to have Dorka with me and so excited at the prospect of my reunion with Shalom, I told everyone willing to listen to me about my good fortune. Word spread through the refugee community that I wished to leave the city as quickly as possible to be reunited with my brother. Those who knew me were happy for me and envious at the same time. I would be the first of my acquaintances to leave.

Someone came to visit me. I was told they knew of someone through someone else who could make the necessary arrangements for me. I was told it would be much faster than going through official channel in spite of my papers. Assured that in no time I would be on my way, I agreed to meet this individual.

A few days later a man arrived at my door. He introduced himself by saying he was the person I wanted to meet. He told me there would be no problem making the needed travel arrangements. He asked where I wanted to go. I told him. He replied that

he could do it quickly but it would cost me two thousand rubles for the ticket and his services.

It was a lot of money. I had the two thousand rubles saved from the years I had worked. I was so anxious to leave as soon as possible, I didn't think about the cost for more than a moment. Without questioning him and without further thought other than the thought of leaving, I gave him the required sum. Before long he returned with my ticket. I was thrilled.

I packed my clothing and other items I had purchased over the years. Dorka and I bought bags of fruit and bread for the trip that lay ahead. Making our purchases in the *shuk* had to be less expensive than buying along the way and we were assured to have food to eat. We were ready for the trip. I was excited and at the same time nervous. I was not sure what I was returning home to.

People from Baranovich and from the refugee community at large gathered at the train station to say goodbye. The number of people who had gathered there overwhelmed me. Their outpouring of good wishes mixed with tears. I was anxious to go and at the same time saddened to leave the people who had become my friends.

Dorka and I boarded the train. We were immediately confronted by officials who arrested both of us. Surrounded by these men, we were taken from the train. I did not understand what was happening or why it was happening to us. When I asked the officials why, I was answered with silence. I was certain they had made a mistake.

My friends called out, "What is happening? What is going on?"

No answers were given.

I suddenly realized Dorka was no longer by my side. They had separated us in the midst of the confusion surrounding the arrest.

I was taken to the jail. Still there was no explanation. I was placed in a cell with five other women. I was dressed in my good traveling clothes, surrounded by bags filled with clothing, food and other items. The women in the cell grabbed away anything they could. I was too stunned to move, too stunned to stop them. All I could focus on was the question "Why?"

Different inmates called out to me, " Who are you? Why are you here? Are you some sort of queen all dressed up that way? You must be rich. Are you here because of your own money?"

I learned very quickly about the women who I was jailed with whether I wished to or not. The only means of communication if one could call it that was to yell between the cells. They called out, so and so killed their mother; this one killed their father; this one stole that. The women in the jail were criminals of all sorts, thieves, murderers, and so forth. At first I was too numb to worry about my safety. I was too preoccupied with trying to think of what I had done to be arrested. I could think of nothing. As I sat there reviewing the events, I realized that I pointed out the Samarkand jail to Dorka on our way to the train station. The irony of it! Now I was incarcerated there. Later when I realized how dangerous many of the inmates were, I tried harder to keep to myself, to watch my back so to speak.

The first thing the jailers did was to have my long, beautiful hair cut off. The woman assigned to this job trembled as she cut. It was the first of many things done to humiliate, degrade and demoralize. The conditions were beyond belief. Terrible does not

describe it. It was unbearable, just unbearable. I slept on the bare floor. There were no mattresses. There was no privacy of any sort, no privacy at anytime. The food served consisted of bread and watery soup containing who knows what. I could not eat it. The others would grab the soup away. I was starving. I could only manage to eat the small ration of bread.

My friends made inquiries. They brought or sent food to be given to me. The jailers or the inmates took the food away. I doubt I could not have eaten it anyway. Maybe it was fear that caused me to loose my appetite.

The inmates continued their jibes. They would repeat the same questions over and over again. They would also repeat the following, "If you can live through this, your destiny is for life." In Russian it had a lilt to it. I heard it so many times it was imbedded in my mind. To think that such people had a philosophical outlook. I always found this amazing.

I was taken for interrogation on several different occasions. "How do you know the man who made your arrangement? How did you contact him?" They wanted to know many things that I had no knowledge about. They asked the same questions over and over again, rephrased slightly. It became a litany. The interrogators asked, "Why if I had all the official papers you needed to go to Baranovich, did you deal with this man?" I responded as simply as I could or not at all.

One interrogator asked, "How do you feel?"

I answered him, " I know this world from Doystoyevsky and now I am in it."

I don't know how long I was jailed before the trial. I was tried side by side with the man who arranged my ticket. I learned during the trial that they had questioned

Dorka, released her after a few days and sent her back to Baranovich. I was relieved to know that she had not suffered the way I had. Their case against me was based on my one time association with the other defendant. He had made or procured false documents and had made unnecessary arrangements for others as well as myself. The proceedings took place as if I was watching a play only I was part of it. It was surreal. At the conclusion of the trial, I was sentenced to three years in a forced labor camp, a *gulag*. If only I had been suspicious at that outset, when I had heard that so and so knew so and so and so forth.

I still could make no sense of my arrest, my trial and now my traumatic interment in this labor camp, Camp Itika. I do not know where the labor camp was located other than it was a fair distance from Samarkand. I believe I was there for months, less than a year. I can't tell you how many months for time had little or no relevance. It was so terrible that I have little recollection of this period. Imagine the worst possible scenario and make in far worse. Despite how deplorable it was, in some ways it was still better than the conditions in the Samarkand jail. Here we lived in bunks. We were taken to work daily. The work was hard physical labor. The moral surroundings were a nightmare. I worried about everyday survival due to the people around me. The criminals in the camp made the women in Samarkand seem relatively innocuous.

There were others like me who had been sentenced to spend time or maybe the rest of their lives in the place. I met several Jewish writers. One told me he had loved mother Russia with all of his heart. But now he could no longer love her. For she had made him a liar and a thief in order to survive. For this he was sentenced to a living hell.

I am a person who dreams. Sometimes the dreams have relevance like the time in the village. One particular night I had a very strange dream. I will never forget it. In my dream, I am in a quarantine center for tuberculosis. I am trying to find a way out. There are many tall buildings. Between two buildings, I locate a narrow space. Somehow I squeeze myself through the opening. I am outside of the walled city in a big open place, a beautiful field. This was my dream. It was so vivid yet it made no sense to me.

The next day Shalom arrived taking me away from my personal hell.

Shalom explained how he knew I was there. Immediately upon her return to Baranovich, Dorka told him what had happened to us. He went to Samarkand thinking that I was still jailed there only to learn that I had been sent away to the labor camp. The extended Russian relatives in Samarkand, friends like Chaika Kastenbaum and others pooled their money with my brother's. He found out where I was, went to the camp, and bribed the officials for my release. Imagine, being bought out of prison, but this is what happened.

Shalom took me to back to Samarkand to rest for a few days. We stayed with the Kastenbaums. I did not have the proper words to express my gratitude to all those involved in my rescue. I was overwhelmed and overwrought by emotion. I was weak and completely exhausted from the toll that the physical labor had taken.

Where I got the strength to survive this ordeal I will never know. The fear and the doubt that I felt will always cloud my memory of this time. My brother's action was a miracle I could never have imagined. In moments of despair in this camp, I thought I would never live to be free again. My destiny was for life. I survived as the inmates in the Samarkand jail intoned over and over again.

Chapter 9:

It was time for me to once again bid farewell to my friends in Samarkand. I had such mixed emotions. Happiness, sadness and trepidation welled up inside me. Having survived such an ordeal, I did not want to think about what ordeals I might face in Baranovich.

With sacks filled with bread and fruit we were as prepared as we could be for the trip to Baranovich. It took about a week by train. As I had experienced in my journey east, the train stopped in various places to buy or barter for food and drink.

Shalom tearfully related the fate of our family during the trip back. He said, "I have the sorry duty to tell you that Yaacov, who had also joined the partisans, was killed early in on in an effort to try to smuggle ammunition into the ghetto. Our Mother organized the youth in the ghetto. She encouraged them to leave their parents, escape the ghetto and hide in the woods in order to attempt to survive. She felt their chances were greater out outside the ghetto. She was killed for her actions.

I smuggled myself back into the ghetto to see our Father. I tried to persuade him to go with me to the forest, to live with the partisans. Father said he did not know if you or Bomkeh were alive. He was afraid to leave for fear of missing word of either of you. He died in the ghetto as well."

The weight of their deaths was crushing. I cried until there were no tears left to cry. I had always believed as Rifkah had encouraged me to do that they too were living their days somewhere safe.

Finally we arrived in Baranovich. I had been telling myself over and over again that war changes many things as it had surely changed me. Still, I was unprepared for

what I found. The city was in shambles. There was only a remnant of our house. I briefly thought of all the beautiful furniture, the antique dishes for Pesach, all gone. There was no attempt to look to see if anything was left. What did it matter now?

I asked about my friends in Baranovich. I learned that Henyik Tannenbaum was killed on the transport I missed. It was bombed. No one survived. I supposed it was my destiny to live just as the convicts in Samarkand kept saying.

It was my worst nightmare come true. Nearly all my family was gone. All my friends were gone. Everywhere I looked the streets held memories. No one was there. It was a city streaming with blood that cried out. I had seen the mountain of bones. I was told that was the resting-place of my beloved parents and brother. I could not stay there close to the graves of all our family and friends. I knew then that I would never adjust to a life in this city ever again. The precious things in our lives were gone. The memories were too strong. The air held only sadness and dismay. The weight of loss lay heavily on my being.

I knew from his letter that Shalom and Dorka hoped to leave Baranovich, but I did not know when. I told Shalom, "We must run away from Baranovich as quickly as possible. My sanity is at stake. I think I will go crazy if we remain here a minute longer than necessary."

I had no idea what we would do or how. I trusted Shalom with this responsibility. He seemed to have connections. It took four long weeks for him to arrange things. Those four weeks hold no memories except those of extreme sorrow.

Shalom, Dorka and I secretly readied ourselves to leave. We took very little with us so as not to arouse suspicion. We did not have official permission to go to Lodz, but

that was our destination. I never really knew how Shalom had done it nor did I ever ask. He had obtained false identification papers for us to use should we be stopped. Sometimes we went by wagon, sometimes by foot, sometimes by train. We followed the directions we were given by those who were smuggling us to Lodz. In Lodz we gained still another set of identities and documents. This time our identification was as Greek refugees. I believe these identities came through the *Bericha.*

The *Bericha* was an escape organization that operated illegally as an underground group. It was made up of people from the *yishuv*, Jewish partisans and Zionist youth movement members. Perhaps Shalom's association with the partisans enabled us to become part of this group.

We were smuggled across borders by any means possible. We were led to Greece. We were sent to Athens as part of a large group of people. I remember visiting the synagogue there. How long we were there I don't remember. So much was happening at once. From Athens we were sent to Bratislava in Czechoslovakia. This was a holding station, a temporary stop in the chain of escape. The *Bericha* arranged this. We went in bunches, in big groups with people we did not know. They came from all over. Everyone had similar stories of heart wrenching loss. It was our bond. We had made it this far. We did not know how far we would need to still travel or what the future held for us.

The next stop was Vienna, Austria. Vienna was also a transit place, a displaced persons station for refugees. The Rothschild Hospital was used as the transfer point. We slept and received our rations there. Our stay lasted about one week.

Vienna bore the effects of the war, as did other cities. Food was in short supply there as well. It did not bother me. It was what I had become accustomed to. I met many people close to my age that came to the city through the *Bericha.* A group of us joined together to take advantage of what the city had to offer. The Opera House was open and performances were being given. I love opera. A group of us went to see performances of *Madame Butterfly* and *Tosca.* It was such a morale booster. It was so uplifting, such a good feeling in the midst of all the trouble and uncertainty.

Again we were moved. We were sent to Wels, another transit station. Wels was located west of Vienna and northeast of Salzburg. It was at this point that I again lost contact with Shalom and Dorka. The officials separated us into two groups. Married couples were sent in one direction. Single people were sent in another. I no longer knew where Shalom and Dorka were. I knew they were alive and I had to believe they were somewhere safe.

Events in Wels were to influence and shape the next years of my life. It was here that I met Brigadier Chumsky from the Jewish Brigade serving with the British army. The Jewish Brigade played a major role in the *Bericha* as well as helping to organize welfare and educational programs.

I was so hungry to speak Hebrew again that I used this opportunity to converse. Through our conversations Brigadier Chumsky learned about my background in Judaica, Hebrew and pedagogy. "Nina," told me "I have a very special and important job for you to do. With your knowledge of the Hebrew language, you would be an invaluable teacher for the older youth in the camp. I want you to undertake the job of teaching them and

making them ready for illegal *aliyah*. Please help us mobilize and organize these teenagers."

I could not turn his request down. It was not only an opportunity for me to teach, which I longed to do for so long, but I felt to make a contribution in some way.

I was not in Wels for long, maybe weeks or maybe a month or two. Whether the Brigadier played a role in my next move I can only guess. It makes sense looking back on it now.

I was sent to a Displaced Persons (DP) camp in Bindermichel. Bindermichel was located near Linz that was east of Wels. It was 1946. I was to set up a school there. However, since Bindermichel was a transit station, the officials felt no one would be there long enough to warrant a real school. With help from a Mr. Balkalchuk, I gathered a few benches and a few chairs to furnish the "school". We had no desks, no tables. There were no books to use and no supplies. The school was created one might say from thin air. I taught from what I could remember. It didn't matter. The children were so anxious to learn. They thirsted for knowledge and devoured all that I could give them.

The children in the school were not ordinary children. They originated primarily from Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Each of them had a story. They survived the camps. They had lived in caves or the forests with or without their parents. They had been hidden. They had one thing in common aside from their survival. They all had a pallor of sadness. They had lost the twinkle of youth from their eyes. They began to resemble the average child only when they were learning.

There were never any discipline problems. The children didn't want lessons to be over. They didn't want recess. One might say it was abnormal. But then, their

childhood years spent in the war were abnormal. Their childhood was disrupted by the horrors of war. They had seen so much, been through so much. My first objective was to unite this diverse group of children by teaching them to speak Hebrew. The other reason for teaching them Hebrew before anything else was to ready them for illegal *aliyah*, immigration to Palestine. Most of them were orphans with no where to go and no known surviving relatives. They thirsted for knowledge. They clung to every word and words were all I had to give them. I taught them from memory. Their desire to learn everything they could quickly was as if they were pushed by some inner force to make up for lost time.

We learned together and lived together communally, *kibbutz* style. This life style took the place of a family structure. It gave the children a change to get to know one another. Some shared their stories. Others were not ready to relate what had happened to them. I learned to deal with their mental and emotional states, hoping to help them begin to heal. They learned to rely on one another, something they would need when it came time to make *aliyah*. Living with my students enabled me to watch over them, hold them when necessary and encourage them to use the Hebrew language. It was a learning experience for all of us. I tried to help them and to ready them for what I felt lie ahead.

Our lack of a proper school with proper supplies eventually took its toll on me. Speaking daily in that large cold hall led to loss of my voice. It was not ordinary laryngitis. My voice was gone. I could not teach. I wrote my instructions to the children. They were wonderful and cooperative. I did what I could for them and they for me.

At this time, Simon Weisenthal came to Bindermichel. He was told about my work with the teenage refugees. He was apparently impressed by what he heard. He was a compassionate man. When he found out I had been unable to speak for a long time, he asked to meet with me. He expressed his concern about my condition. He arranged for the best doctors to come to the camp to examine me. It took time, but following their instructions I did regain use of my voice.

The Bericha representative at Bindermichel was named Avraham. He sent my students and me to the DP camp at Bergen-Belsen. The children were there to continue their preparations prior to leaving on an *aliyah.* I was there to help them through this transition. We had grown close. Our last weeks together were very special. They had cemented their relationship before my eyes. A genuine feeling of warmth, of great fondness had grown between us. I returned to Bendermichel just before they left. It saddened me greatly to leave them. They held a special place in my heart.

Meanwhile, Shalom had been trying to find me. He had made many inquiries. He had been in Landsberg, a large DP camp west of Munich. When he began to work for the Joint Distribution Committee he was transferred to Munich. The Joint Distribution Committee helped finance a portion of the welfare and educational activities in the American Zone.

Shalom traced me to Bindermichel and wrote to me. He again wanted me to join him and Dorka. I did not want to leave my students, but I was overjoyed at the prospect of being with my family again.

It was 1947. With Shalom's help, I found a position teaching in the Neufreimen DP camp located near Munich. I was able to work there and was still able to spend time

with my brother and his wife. Neufreimen was not a transit camp. It was a former military camp as were the transit points. UNRRA, United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and the JDC, Joint Distribution Committee organized it. Different DP camps were operated under the auspices of the French, English, or American governments depending on their geographical location. Neufreiman was an American operated DP camp. The camp was run *Kehillah* style that is by a central committee of leaders. This group of Jews, acting as administrators, were aided by Americans from the JDC, members of UNRRA and by some military personnel.

Neufreimen was a relatively small camp. In the middle of the camp was the administrative office and distribution area. There was also a canteen where one could make small purchases. There were sturdy barracks, built like small homes, which had been used by the German military for housing. They were made of concrete and stone with wooden shutters. Some buildings had dormers in the roofs. All had some sort of heating system. Now either four people or families shared these units. Each had a little apartment in the building with a kitchen. They were warm in winter. Conditions were good. Food was distributed by the JDC in the form of canned goods. This was to augment other DP rations. Jews in the DP camps had rations that the Germans living around the camps had no access to. Some refugees made money by selling cigarettes to the Germans. Many people including myself traded some of these rations for other things that were needed like dishes, silverware, and bed linen. I was able to stockpile canned goods as well as some housewares during the year and half or so I was there.

Neufreimen already had an organized school with a full compliment of teachers. Unlike Bindermichel the school had books and basic supplies. The books came from

either Palestine or through the JDC. The school was housed in a heated building of its own. It bore a sign which read "*Bet Sefer Ivri, School*" over the front door. It was much more welcoming than the cold hall I had taught in. The children in this camp were like those in Bindermichel. We taught them and cried with them. We tried to give them a taste of normalcy. We took them for walks. We celebrated the holidays as they came in their cycle. We celebrated Purim with costume parties and plays. They were wonderful children. Each of them was precious like gold for they were our future. Again many of these children were readied to make illegal aliyah to Palestine.

I taught with many wonderful people, some of who are my friends to this day. We became a tight knit group. When time permitted, our teachers' group traveled to both sight see and to entertain ourselves. We went to visit beautiful places like Garmish where we enjoyed the mountains and the snow. We went to Munich to see shows and operas. We worked together, socialized together. We became dependent on one another. For some there were no family members left. We became each other's families in essence.

At this time, The Central Committee, She'erit ha Pelitah, the Jewish Agency and the JDC set up an autonomous education system for the DP camps. The teachers in all the DP camps were formally organized to create Histadrut Hamorim, a teachers' organization. Seminars were held where we would all meet. Speakers were brought in. By organizing ourselves in this way, we were able to share ideas, learning from one another. We were able to learn from the representatives, schlichem, who came from Palestine to observe and to instruct. We also benefited from visitors from the United States who came to see what our educational conditions were and to offer assistance in bettering our lot.

During my time in Neufreimen, General Dwight D. Eisenhower came to inspect the Displaced Persons camp with a group of other men. We looked upon this visit as an opportunity to let him and other officials know that we strongly favored the establishment of a Jewish state and wanted the chance to go to Palestine to settle. We organized a march, in which men, women and children participated. We made banners out of cloth. We marched in an orderly fashion down the main street of the camp to show our solidarity. Whether our effort made an impression on him, we never knew. We were however satisfied that we had made our wishes known.

My greatest surprise during my stay in Neufriemen came the day my brother Bomkeh found me. He introduced me to his wife, Hinda, who was pregnant. I was so excited. It was a wonderful reunion filled with joy and a multitude of questions. They had been in a French DP camp before being transferred to Neufreimen. Needless to say I couldn't wait for the opportunity to go to Munich to reunite Shalom with Bomkeh.

It was a wonderful time for us. We visited together as frequently as we could during the six months that Bomkeh there. He shared their plans with Shalom, Dorka and I. He agreed that staying in Baranovich or elsewhere in Poland was not an option. His goal was to go to Palestine.

Bomkeh told us they planned to take part in an aliyah to Palestine. This was a dangerous undertaking particularly for a pregnant woman. We heard that the British were not allowing immigrants into Palestine. Anyone attempting to enter Palestine was considered an illegal immigrant subject to arrest and/or deportation back to their point of origin.

Some years later we learned from Bomkeh that they had taken part in what became known as Aliyah Bet. They had been sent to Cyprus and interred under terrible conditions in a detention camp. Their son Rafi was born during their time on Cyprus.

Chapter 10

Approximately six months prior to the closing of Neufreimen, Shalom suggested that I move to Munich. He and Dorka were already planning their aliyah to Palestine. He wanted us to spend time together before they left. He promised to introduce me to the head of the Hebrew High School in Munich where he was certain I could get a teaching position. I left Neufreimen shortly before its closure. It was sometime in 1948.

Shalom and Dorka had a nice apartment on Prince Regentestrasse, near the Opera House. I lived with them. They told me the apartment would be mine when they left for Palestine. How fortunate I was to have them look out for my interests.

I interviewed for a position at the Hebrew High School that was one of two such institutions. The other was in Bergen-Belsen's DP camp. The school was located in a revamped private home across from the Jewish community center on Melstrasse. The principal was a Professor Graebart. I had a good strong teaching background, but no diplomas to prove my degrees. I had letters of reference from the camps, which described the work I had done. He hired me based on my word and those letters. This position was salaried with the money coming from the JDC and the German government.

The school program lasted two to three years. The textbooks were distributed by the JDC but were printed in Munich in the same facility where the Jewish newspaper was run.

The students in the high school were all survivors. Some were orphans from the DP camps in the area. They came from Feldafing, Foehrenwald, Neufreimen and other DP camps. Some left parents behind in the camps. Some came from families who had settled in Munich. Various families took in children who needed housing.

I was teaching there a short time, when a very learned and respected teacher left to go to Palestine. I was to replace this teacher. The old teacher was not only very learned but had an incredible memory. He knew the entire Talmud by heart. How I was going to replace him and teach a group of teenage boys worried me greatly. The day I started with this class I was very nervous. I was shaking on the inside as I entered the classroom to face these young men. What were they going to think of me? I marched in, sat on the top of the desk and called the roll. I learned all their names, all sixteen of them, rapidly. They never gave me any trouble.

Later, after I had taught them for some time, they told me why it was they were so cooperative. The secret lay in my having learned their names so quickly. The old teacher was very knowledgeable, but he didn't know one student from the other. They were impressed that I felt it was important to be able to identify each of them as individuals before worrying about lessons!

I developed a special relationship with these students as I had with those in Neufreimen. We became very close. They regarded me like an older sister. Some came for advice. Some came to talk because they trusted me to listen and not say anything. Many suffered the affects of the dramatic and traumatic experiences they had been through. They needed someone to be there for them. I was able to draw them out. I assured them that learning would enable them to grow to handle the challenges they were yet to face. There is a saying in Russian. It says, "Learning is a struggle; the struggle makes you someone." These children had been through struggles albeit not academic ones. I tried to stand by them and offer encouragement, as they needed it. These

children were so serious. They had missed a piece of childhood that they could never recapture.

Shalom and I corresponded as best we could. He wrote that things in Palestine were difficult, almost as difficult as they had been in Europe. Food was difficult to obtain. There was true hunger there. Linens and china were also scarce. I immediately began to pack the canned goods and extra housewares I had accumulated in Neufreimen. I planned to ship these cartons for him and Bomkeh to share. This was just before the declaration of the State of Israel and the War of Independence.

When Professor Graebart left the Munich High School, a Mr. Kramer who had previously headed the Berlin High School replaced him. Mr. Kramer was a nice man whose company I enjoyed. In time he asked me to marry him, but I could not. I had decided not to marry until I was permanently settled. In spite of the fact that I was enjoying the city, Munich was not going to my permanent residence.

Shortly after my refusal, Mr. Kramer announced his decision to go to Palestine. He knew that my brothers were there. I believe he hoped that I would change my mind once I knew he was going to Palestine, or that one day I go there and marry him. He volunteered to take all the canned food, linens, and china I packed. He promised he would deliver them personally to my family. His actions saved their lives.

Shalom wrote.

Dear Sister:

Bomkeh and I cannot thank you enough for the packages you sent with Kramer. They have helped us deal with the shortages that prevail here. Conditions continue to be very difficult, but we will get through it.

We have discussed whether or not you should come here. This is the advice we offer. We both feel you have been through so much already. We cannot see you having to face yet more severe conditions or other ordeals here at this time. Should you desire to join us later, when hopefully conditions have improved, we would welcome you with open arms. If you decide to come now, we would welcome you the same way. Of course the decision is yours.

We feel if you have the opportunity to go to America, you should do so. You know it would be good to have a sister in America.

Be well. Let us know what you decide.

With love from us all,

Shalom

Time marched on. I continued to teach Bible, Hebrew literature and other subjects at the high school. I saw all the operas that were performed at the Opera house. A composer who lived in the building provided some tickets. Things were good for me. I always loved fur coats so I had a sealskin coat made to keep me nice and warm as I always felt the cold. I was having a good time with my fellow workers and my friends.

With the closing of Neufreimen many of my friends were leaving the area. My friends the Schusters, the Spectors and the Glogers all left for America. Shalom and Bomkeh were in Palestine with their families. I realized there was nothing holding me in Munich. It was time for me to make a decision as to where I would go next.

I heeded Shalom and Bomkeh's advice. I contacted my Aunt Gruna in New York. She was overjoyed that I was considering going to America. She wrote that I was to consider her home my home. She promised to care for me as one of her own.

My decision did not come easily. I had a boyfriend in Munich who asked me to marry. I stood by my decision not to marry until I settled permanently. He was unsure what he was going to do. He thought that he would be able to join his mother and sister who were already in New York. However, his application was denied. After long and careful consideration I decided to accept Aunt Gruna's generous invitation. I was going to America!

Chapter 11

I left Munich in March 1951. I had to travel to Bremerhaven to board the ship to New York. The ship was not a passenger liner. It was a war ship that was commissioned to carry displaced persons from Europe to New York. It was called The General Stewart.

I knew it would not be an easy trip. I hadn't anticipated just how poor the conditions would be. It was crowded with people. Some were alone like myself. Others traveled in small family groups. There was no comfortable place to be or to go. A few days after we left port, weather conditions began to deteriorate. People were becoming seasick. Seasickness was the norm rather than the exception. I too suffered the ill effects of the trip. At times I wondered if I would ever reach New York alive. When the ship reached its scheduled stop at Halifax, Canada, a raging snowstorm forced the ship to remain there one day longer than anticipated.

Finally, sailing on calmer seas, our destination was in sight. New York harbor lay in front of me. Excitement cursed through me as I anticipated the reunion with my cousins and my aunt. Yet at the same time, I felt a pang of trepidation. Another new situation with all its unknown factors lay ahead of me. It was April 7, 1951.

My fears eased the moment I saw Tzila and Manya. Manya had come to New York in the late 1930's. Tzila had come as a child when her father sent for them. To me they looked fantastic. How I appeared to them did not matter. I was so overjoyed to be in their presence.

"How are you?" we all asked at once. "What can we do for you?" What could I have needed? I arrived with clothing, books, a radio and some crystal. I had letters of recommendation from my administrators' in Germany and. from Professor Sukenik from

Israel whom I had met when he was a shaliach to Germany. I had a contract to go to Erie, Pennsylvania to teach.

Manya and Tzila looked at one another. They insisted there was no reason to go to Erie. They tried to appeal to my sense of logic. "Why would you want to leave New York when you have friends and family here? Why go somewhere where you know no one? Haven't you had enough of that kind of experience already?" They insisted there were plenty of positions for me as a teacher right in New York. I really didn't want to leave. So I took their advice.

It was a week or to before Pesach, Passover. I had originally planned to remain in New York with my family until after the holiday and then leave for Erie. Now it had all changed. My family was wonderful to me but I do not want to be a burden to them. I felt that I could not take advantage of their kindness for a lengthy period of time. No one pressured me except myself.

Through some connection I have forgotten I got a job in a tie factory. My responsibility was to sew the labels on the ties. I worked one day, stabbing myself repeatedly, putting labels on crooked or only half on, working at a snail's pace! At the end of the day, I did not know how I was going to return there for another day's work. I knew I was totally inept for the job. I didn't like sewing. I liked working with people. The problem was solved for me. The owner paid me my day's wages. He told me I did not belong there and under no circumstances was I to return. I was relieved but at the same time worried about what I would do

I went to see Manya at her apartment in Brooklyn. I cried to her, "I am not crying because I was fired. I am crying over the conditions in which the people in the tie factory

were working. The lighting was terrible. The machines made constant pounding noises so loud you could not even think. It was dusty. It was crowded. It was horrible!"

Her reaction was not what I expected. She did not sympathize with me. She yelled at me, balled me out. "Who do you think you are? The people employed there are glad to have those jobs, to be earning a living. Those jobs put bread on the table and roof over people's heads. You have no right to cry over it! How dare you feel sorry for them! After all not everyone can be a teacher like you! Why did you even think to take a job there when you knew you didn't have the necessary skills? You know what you should do, don't you? Take your letters of recommendation and find something you are qualified to do!"

She was right and I knew it. I laid out a new plan for independence following through on it as quickly as I could. I made an appointment to meet with Professor Zvi Sharfstein.

Armed with my letter of recommendation from Professor Sukenick, I went to see Professor Sharfstein. He welcomed me immediately and treated me as if he were an older brother. He invited me to his home where I was warmly received. I was impressed by the man and by his library of books. He asked me many questions about how I survived the war years. I told him my story. He encouraged me to write my story, but I was not ready to put my experiences down on paper. It was still too fresh and emotionally draining for me.

Professor Sharfstein had a difficult time finding a position for me as a teacher. It was close to the end of the academic year. There were no openings. Instead he

recommended that I meet with Shlomo Shulsinger who was associated with Camp Masad.

I did as he recommended. Shulsinger offered me a position as the canteen manager for Camp Masad, a position I held for three summers. Both he and Professor Sharfstein felt it would be a good place for me to make contacts with various principals and school department heads. They also felt that it would give me a good introduction to American youth. They advised me that American youth had a far different mentality from those children I had been working with in Europe.

Meanwhile I still held hope that my boyfriend from Munich would come to New York. Before leaving for Camp Masad, I visited with his mother and sister. They were glad to see me. We talked about my trip to America and what I was doing. When I inquired about my boyfriend, they told me that he had attended some sort of political gathering in Poland. Due to his affiliation with this gathering, he was having problems gaining permission to enter the United States. Love struck, I remained hopeful.

That summer at Masad I met Dr. Linick, the principal of Teferet Yisroel Talmud Torah, on Pennsylvania Avenue, in Brooklyn. He offered me my first teaching post in America. I worked at the Talmud Torah in the afternoons for almost three years as well as being a floater or traveling teacher to other yeshivot, schools, in Brooklyn.

A funny thing happened to me in one of these other schools that helped me to gain insight into American ways. I was teaching Hebrew literature and history to a group of teenage girls. I had come to school on this particular Friday wearing a white blouse and a dark skirt. When school resumed on Sunday, I wore the same outfit as I had on Friday. They girls wanted to know if I had gone home at all over Shabbat. I was offended by the

implication of their question. I was not going to let them know how they upset me. Instead I asked them, "Why would you ask such a question?" "I in America you change your clothing everyday and space wearing your outfits," they replied. This was truly a revelation for me. In Europe, if your clothing were clean you wore them. After that I went to purchase more clothing so I would have a larger wardrobe to rotate.

Again the problem of not having any documents to prove my degrees and verify my background became a stumbling block to gain licensure. Without documentation I could not be licensed. I had to arrange to have a supervisor from the Board of Jewish Education observe my teaching. After three years of observation, I was able to obtain a license and then a diploma based on a lengthy proficiency test that had both written and oral components.

Shortly before Pesach in 1954, I received four different invitations to four different places to spend the holiday. One came from cousins in Bridgeport, Connecticut, another from a friend in Lakewood, New Jersey, a third from my cousin Tzila in Manhattan and the fourth from Nechama Spector, a friend from Neufreimen who had settled in Baltimore. Her invitation also listed the names of other friends from the teaching staff there who had settled in that community. I did not know which invitation to accept so I discussed it with my landlady, Mrs. Perl. She suggested I go to Baltimore for a reunion of friends. "When else will you have the time to do so," she asked. I knew she was right. I accepted the Baltimore invitation.

Nechama Spector was a gracious hostess. It was wonderful to see my friends again and to spend time with them. After a few days, Nechama was afraid I was not enjoying myself, hanging out with a group of old married people. She wanted me to meet

the brother of a woman she went to English class with. His name was Jack Lederkramer. He too had been in Samarkand although we had never met there. Nechama called her friend. The brother indicated he was not interested in meeting someone from out of town. But he was pressured to do it. We met and destiny stepped into my life once again. Jack said to Nechama, "Why didn't you call me before?" I mentioned that I wanted to visit Washington, D.C. to do some sightseeing. Another friend, Ben Schuster, offered to take me, but Jack would not allow him. It was the beginning of a whirlwind courtship.

Jack began to come to New York shortly after my return. I tried to discourage him, telling him that I was still in love with my boyfriend from Munich, who was denied entry to the United States and had settled in Argentina. I hoped he would be allowed entrance to the United States; he hoped I would go to Argentina. It was a relationship dragging on in the realm of hope not in reality. Even my boyfriend's mother and sister said I was crazy to continue to carry a torch for someone I hadn't seen in three years.

Jack was not to be stopped. He pursued me and argued that it would be better to love someone who was at hand and not someone far away who was no better than a dream. His logic appealed to me. I liked him and grew to love him. We were engaged on Shavuot and married on August 29, 1954.

We settled in New York for a brief time before moving to Baltimore when Jack's father became ill. We made a life for ourselves in Baltimore. I taught two generations of children at Chizuk Amuno Congregation, teaching there for over thirty years. Teaching always has remained my first love. A student once said to me, "There must be a reason God saved you. It was so you could teach us." What more can be said?

Postscript

Nina Lederkramer has spent over fifty years teaching. She has influenced several generations of students in Europe and the United States. Her inspiration, her insight and her dedication has always been evident to those fortunate enough to have been under her tutelage. She is greeted warmly wherever she goes by former students.

My own association with this special lady began about twenty years ago when I accepted a teaching position. Nina introduced herself to me immediately. Over the years, she has served as mentor and became a cherished friend.

Although she no longer teaches in a formal setting, she teaches those around her by her actions. Today she continues to study Talmud, shedding her understanding with her fellow students.

I listened and learned as Nina shared her story, her photographs and yizkor, memorial books. She allowed me to probe her memories with a myriad of questions. We spent hours together. We were often emotionally drained by the recollections. When asked, "Are you certain you want to do this, to dredge up these memories?" Her was always, "It is time."

When we finished, I felt compelled to know what happened to the people she spoke of in her story. Millenbaum went to Paris and married there. Rifkah and Miriam went to Israel. Miriam grew, married and had two children who served in the Israeli army. Rifkah died recently. Yitzchak Goldberg married. His son lives in Israel.

After the war Nina learned that Uncle Isaac had been murdered. The men who worked for him at the granary murdered him because of his openly anti-Nazi sentiments.

Aunt Fanya, Uncle Isaac's wife, lived a long life in the Soviet Union. Two of her sons died as a result of illness. Their children came to America. The youngest of Fanya's sons also came to America. Aunt Shifra and her husband are buried in the Soviet Union. Their children, Adik and Laura, are in Israel where they have growing families. The Kastenbaums settled in America, as did the Spilkowskis. They have been life long friends of Nina Lederkramer and her husband.

As the story revealed, Nina's brothers did go to Palestine. They fought in all the wars Israel experienced. Her nephew Rafi was killed during one of them. Each had a family that continues to grow. Her brothers died in the last few years.

The fate of her Father's family was tragic. All the adults remaining in Poland perished. Nina calculated that more than three-quarters of her large family perished during the Holocaust. Only a handful that remained in Europe survived.